

ANDREW B. TORRANCE

ACCOUNTABILITY
TO GOD



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Accountability to God

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To James and Anna Jane

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Introduction

1. Introducing the Concept of Accountability

1.1 A positive view of accountability

The language of accountability has acquired negative connotations in our culture. To call for accountability has become shorthand for condemning the other for their failure to fulfil a particular role. We say that a person ‘needs to be held accountable’ when we want them to be punished for a perceived shortcoming. And it can also function as a threat: ‘If you fail to fulfil this role (in the manner I consider appropriate), then you will be held accountable!’ Yet, as this book will argue, such a view of accountability neglects a more positive, constructive, and, indeed, theologically apt way to think about accountability.¹

So, how might a more positive view of accountability look? The kind of constructive model we shall consider focuses on how relationships of accountability can actually serve to build persons up in their roles rather than threaten or undermine them. In the case of a politician, for example, a positive approach to accountability would focus on how one politician might seek to elevate another politician in their role by pointing to a standard that elevates rather than condemns. In such a relationship, accountability would not be something to avoid but something to embrace, insofar as it helps politicians to grow in their roles. While such a view may initially seem counterintuitive and hard to imagine in the political realm, it is not difficult to find examples of this sort of accountability in many other relationships—for example, between parents and children, teachers and students, employees and supervisors, coaches and players, or sponsors and addicts.

¹ This book accompanies recent research in psychology that also presents a case for a positive role for accountability in human relationships. See C. V. O. Witvliet, ‘Forgiveness, Embodiment, and Relational Accountability: Victim and Transgressor Psychophysiology Research’, in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr., and N. Wade (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2020), pp. 167–77; C. V. O. Witvliet and J. R. Peteet, ‘Accountability’, in *The Virtues in Psychiatric Practice*, ed. J. R. Peteet, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 17–32; M. Bradshaw, B. V. Kent, C. V. O. Witvliet, B. Johnson, S. J. Jang, and J. Leman, ‘Perceptions of Accountability to God and Psychological Well-Being among US Adults’, *Journal of Religion and Health* 61 (2022), pp. 327–52; C. V. O. Witvliet, S. J. Jang, B. R. Johnson, C. S. Evans, J. W. Berry, J. Leman, R. C. Roberts, J. Peteet, A. Torrance, and A. N. Hayden, ‘Accountability: Construct Definition and Measurement of a Virtue Vital to Flourishing’, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (forthcoming).

What is the book's motivation for envisioning a more positive view of accountability? It is prompted by the belief that God creates and commands us to be characterized by relationships of accountability that are defined by love for God and one another. More specifically, it is motivated by the belief that God creates us to play active roles in the world and be held accountable in ways that help us to grow in these roles. The loving nature of these relationships is expressed in two ways, which should be understood together.²

First, relationships of accountability, conceived in the way I have outlined, interpret holding someone accountable as reflecting a desire to elevate them in their role in a shared project. For example, a teacher Ms Jones may hold a student Charlie accountable for his performance as a student out of a desire to help him succeed in the task of learning. Alternatively, if helpful, Charlie may also hold Ms Jones accountable for her performance as a teacher out of a desire to help her succeed in the task of teaching.

Second, such relationships of accountability are evident when the roles of the two parties are in harmony with each other within a shared project. On the one hand, they involve persons with a particular authority (e.g. a practical and/or epistemic authority) desiring a relationship with those who can benefit from their authority—that is, who can benefit from their ability to make good and loving judgements about who another is and the role they should have within their shared project. On the other hand, it also involves a shared desire for relationship with those who have the authority to elevate them in their roles.³ For example, Ms Jones may desire to work with Charlie in the project of education so that she can use her expertise to help Charlie learn (or vice versa if Charlie's feedback can help Ms Jones with her teaching). Also, Charlie may desire to work with Ms Jones so that he can grow under her authority as a teacher (or vice versa). In this respect, accountability not only involves a one-way relationship, in which Ms Jones enforces her authority on to Charlie, but it also involves reciprocation from Charlie—that is, Charlie being receptive to her guidance and responding accordingly (or vice versa).⁴ As we consider in Chapter 3, we can refer to the disposition with which Charlie embraces his accountability to Ms Jones (or vice versa) as the virtue of accountability. Put generally, the virtue of accountability (that is, of 'being accountable') is the disposition that characterizes the person who embraces their accountability to someone with legitimate authority to help a person grow in

² Here, we are echoing Eleonore Stump's Thomistic account of love as requiring 'two interconnected desires: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved, and (2) the desire for union with the beloved'. Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 91; drawing on Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (1920; New Advent online edition, 2017), II-II.25.3.

³ Such a positive relationship of accountability is envisioned, for example, in 1 Pet. 5:1–11.

⁴ As we also consider, there may be ways in which Ms Jones is accountable to Charlie if Charlie has legitimate authority to assess Ms Jones in her role as a teacher. The question of what makes a person's authority legitimate will be given extensive consideration over the course of the book.

a particular role. I shall make a case for this virtue on the understanding that God creates us to flourish by embracing our accountability to God and to one another.

There is an important point to clarify here at the outset, a point that will be given further attention over the course of the book. In loving relationships of accountability, two parties are not simply to love one another according to their specific roles but as persons who are more than their roles—as persons who are to be loved unconditionally. Nonetheless, this does not mean that we are to love one another according to some core inactive and purposeless personhood, in abstraction from our role(s) and action(s). We are to love one another as persons whose being lies not simply in their actions but also in their vocation—as persons whom God creates to play particular roles in the world. So, for example, Ms Jones lovingly holds Charlie accountable as a person who is so much more than his role as a student, but who can nonetheless be loved and judged as a student. This point also applies to how we think more generally about the relationship of accountability between God and humans. God holds us accountable as persons who are not reducible to our roles as human actors, but who nonetheless are to be loved and judged as actors in our particular roles. When we are loved and judged in this way, we are loved and judged on the understanding that our actions really do reveal something of who we are. That said, as we shall also consider, reading others from their actions requires careful interpretation, which can be enormously challenging for a variety of reasons.

So far in this introduction, I have been clear that our thinking about accountability will be theological. To be open about the theological motivations for defining accountability in a particular way could seem like an audacious move. Is it not overly bold, perhaps even arrogant, to let one's exclusive religious beliefs put pressure on how we understand the meaning of certain words? Does it not do violence to the English language to engineer general concepts according to religious beliefs that only represent a segment of the English-speaking population? There are three introductory points to make in response to this concern, on which I shall elaborate in Part I of the book.

First, as I argue in Chapter 1, the book's view of accountability fits well with many other ways in which this word is used in the English language. That said, it is not altogether easy to pin down how this word is generally used. Much of the time, it is used with a lack of precision, allowing it to assume a range of meanings, and often it is simply used as a synonym for 'responsibility'. In response to these circumstances surrounding the use of 'accountability', Part I of the book will be characterized by three concerns: (1) to come up with a more precise definition of 'accountability', albeit one that is representative of how this word tends to be used; (2) to interpret it in a manner that distinguishes it from 'responsibility'; and (3) to seek to understand how accountability might be interpreted theologically.

Second, if a word is feeding into a narrative there are reasons to question, then there may be cause to think critically about how precisely we use that word. In the

case of ‘accountability’, I shall contend that it is worth questioning retributive uses of the word that focus primarily on condemning and punishing others on the basis of their past actions, rather than on helping them to fulfil their role(s) in the world—or, at least, helping them to transition out of a role to which they are not well suited. In Chapter 1, I build a case for a more restorative view of accountability in contrast to some other ways of thinking about accountability. Further, while I shall continue to take a fundamentally theological approach, I shall also build a general case for this view that will appeal to a broader audience, including those who do not embrace the theological premises of the book.

Third, insofar as this book is a work of theology, we shall aim to think about the world as it exists before God. From a theological perspective, there can be valid reasons to rethink the popular meaning of particular words. Just as certain definitions of ‘faith’, ‘hope’, and ‘love’ can be shaped by underlying (a)theological convictions, so also can a definition of ‘accountability’ be shaped in this way. It is not just religious believers who allow their underlying convictions to shape their understanding of certain words; secular convictions also put pressure on how persons come to understand particular words. For example, as we see in Chapter 1, Stephen Darwall adopts P. F. Strawson’s secular view of reactive attitudes to shape his view of accountability, which represents one of the more prominent views of accountability in contemporary philosophy.

As the book will attempt to show, these three points provide justification for thinking about accountability in the specific, more positive way that I am proposing.

1.2 Accountability and narrative

When Ms Jones holds Charlie accountable, Ms Jones does so based on an account of who she thinks Charlie is and should be as a character in a narrative that Ms Jones believes and narrates about Charlie⁵—that is, as a character who has a meaningful role to play in a diachronic project that aims towards certain ends.⁶ For example, when Ms Jones holds Charlie accountable, she does so according to

⁵ This narrational view of accountability aligns with Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin, and Thomas Schillema’s understanding of accountability in their introductory chapter, ‘Public Accountability’, to *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, ed. Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin, and Thomas Schillema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 2–3. It also echoes Alasdair MacIntyre’s view of accountability in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 218.

⁶ Our discussion of narratives here could be seen to refer to master narratives insofar as master narratives are ‘largely defined’ as ‘culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. These are not stories of individuals’ lives (i.e. personal narratives), but are broad culture-specific stories that are available for individuals to potentially internalize and resist, both consciously and unconsciously.’ Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed, ‘Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context’, *Human Development* 58 (2015): pp. 318–49; quotation from p. 323. See also P. L. Hammack, ‘Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 12 (2008): pp. 222–47.

who she thinks Charlie is and should be as a student within a story she believes about learning, which has its end in Charlie's intellectual goals.

A major challenge to systems of accountability is that, at any one time, there are likely to be a variety of competing narratives in play. This means there will be an array of competing expectations of who particular persons should be. For example, Ms Jones may hold to a very different story about learning—with different views about its overarching ends and values—than some of Charlie's other teachers, or his parents, or, indeed, Charlie himself. This means Charlie could find himself being pulled in a variety of different directions based on competing views of who he is and should be.

Thus, the different narratives people hold inform their accounts of who they suppose others should be in particular roles. Nonetheless, it is worth raising this point to draw attention to a dynamic that is often neglected when persons make calls for accountability. To hold someone accountable requires one to believe that one has a right to judge another person as a character in one's own narrative. Such a belief will often be uncontroversial. Normally, for example, we are happy to recognize that parents, teachers, and doctors have a right to judge relevant aspects of who their children, students, and patients are and should be. Yet there will also be situations in which parents, teachers, and doctors are found to believe stories that will lead us to question whether they have this right—for example, when they embrace narratives that facilitate abuse, deceit, and exploitation; or, indeed, when their narratives simply fail to encourage the kind of positive growth we might expect to see in persons under their guidance.

A difficulty here is that the question of whether a person has legitimate authority, and so the right to hold certain persons accountable, is not always easy to answer. This difficulty is compounded when we ask which (a)religious, moral, cultural, and philosophical master narratives or metanarratives should inform our judgements about authority. This problem is evident, for example, when some parents have concerns about teachers of a different narrational persuasion teaching their children about religion, morality, politics, or, indeed, any topic that may be seen to clash with the parents' worldview—teaching about evolution, for example, has proven to be highly contentious in certain contexts. Meanwhile, other parents may have concerns if those teachers do not have a particular narrational persuasion informing their teaching. Parents have these concerns because they are aware that teachers, as persons who are perceived to have authority, have an immense power to captivate students in their narratives in a way that shapes their formation. More generally, these kinds of concerns are also evident whenever persons have doubts about the narrational commitments of powerful people in politics, business, religion, media, academia, and society more broadly.

Despite the many ways in which persons become captivated and controlled by narratives, there is often a lack of transparency, reflection, or even awareness of how narratives shape the perception and exercise of authority. There is even

less transparency, reflection, or awareness about who authors these powerful narratives. Most of us unconsciously inherit our narratives accidentally, by osmosis, from growing up in environments where we are surrounded by storytelling. In response to the frequently capricious and unreflective ways in which we form our narratives—and consequently, our views about authority and accountability—this book will propose a theological framework for thinking about these things based on the following three premises: (1) all authority ultimately comes from God, as the author of creation; (2) the one true narrative according to which we should judge all other narratives is the story for which God creates the world; and (3) each of us is ultimately accountable to God as characters in God’s story, so it is on this basis that we must think about what it means to be accountable to one another.⁷

One could easily respond to these three premises by suggesting that, historically, the adoption of this theological narrative was the result of a merely accidental series of events. When we examine the development of anyone’s narrative framework, there will always appear to be some accidental circumstances at play. Despite any appearance of caprice, we shall proceed on the understanding that, although accidental circumstances may often lead us to embrace false narratives, it is also the case that, when we find ourselves functioning properly in an environment that is conducive to learning the truth, we can discover true narrative(s) in and through accidental circumstances.⁸ And for the sake of the more substantive theological work I shall be doing in the book, we shall assume that a version of the orthodox Christian narrative is true. For those who disagree with this assumption, this book should hopefully serve as a challenge for them to think more critically about how their own narrative commitments shape their understanding of authority and accountability. Finally, to reiterate, while there are specific theological assumptions shaping this book’s analysis, I shall also endeavour to speak more generally about the concept of accountability in a way that may allow our conceptual work to be more broadly applicable. To do so, much of Part I will engage with narrative views that are not exclusive to the Christian faith—for example, the narratives that shape the relationships of accountability between doctors and patients, teachers and students, or coaches and athletes.

2. Introducing a Theology of Accountability

A major challenge that faces the task of thinking theologically about accountability is that the word ‘accountability’ emerged only within the last two hundred years,

⁷ These premises, especially (1) and (3), are evident in Rom. 14:6–12.

⁸ Moreover, I shall argue that God creates a world in which belief in God’s narrative is contingent upon a series of (historical, geographical, cultural, biological, etc.) variables unfolding in just the right way, albeit while also recognizing that God actively plays a fundamental role in enabling persons to know the true narrative.

becoming prominent within the last fifty.⁹ In this recent rise, there has been very little focused analysis of the concept of accountability, especially in theology, and it has tended to be used synonymously with responsibility. A central aim of this book will be to address this lacuna by proposing a constructive way forward for thinking theologically about accountability. As a work of analytic theology, the first part of the book will commit to developing a clear and precise account of the concept of accountability, which will lay the groundwork for thinking theologically about accountability in the second part. However, while the conceptual analysis of Part I will seek to think broadly about accountability, it will also be developed in anticipation of and under pressure from the theological view that will be put forward in Part II. If analytic theology is to be truly theological, it must not only be conceptual analysis that shapes our theology, but also theology that informs our conceptual analysis.

According to the more positive view of accountability I am proposing, we flourish under the judgement of those who have an authoritative account of who we are and should be. However, we must also recognize that there can be few things more detrimental to human flourishing than abusive, deceptive, and exploitative relationships masquerading as relationships of accountability: relationships in which persons falsely claim authority to enable them to abuse, deceive, and exploit persons under their power—as is evident, for example, in the histories of slavery, colonialism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and the more everyday cases of bullying. What is the motive for advocating such a high view of accountability, despite such serious risks? It is the understanding that, fundamentally, we have been created to exist and to be defined as characters in God's story of creation and, derivatively, in the true stories of other humans. The ultimate reason that things go so very wrong for humanity, I shall argue, is that we resist accountability to God in favour of embracing false relationships of accountability to illegitimate authorities. Rather than embracing God as the ultimate authority over creation, we fall into viewing ourselves as the ultimate authors and authorities over our lives. We then put a positive spin on this situation by unreservedly promoting the autonomy of the human will, only then to elevate confused and overinflated notions of human autonomy, or autarchy, according to which we are the ultimate governors—the ones with ultimate control—over the meaning of our existence. This is the meaning of the story of the Fall: humans bring disorder to creation by prioritizing their own judgements of who they should be over against God's account of them. In response to this disorder, the story of redemption is the story of God restoring order to creation. This takes place by God, in Christ, embodying, and thereby giving to us, the true account of creation. For the apostle

⁹ See Melvin Dubnick, 'Accountability as a Cultural Keyword', in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, ed. Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin, and Thomas Schillemans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 23–5.

Paul, Jesus Christ is the one in, through, and for whom ‘all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers. . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (Col. 1:16–17). It is by coming to identify with the one in whom the true account of creation is given that creation comes to embrace its true accountability before God.

This synopsis of the underlying connection between accountability and theology raises four introductory points, points I take to be fundamental to the theology of accountability the book is developing. These points are: (1) accountability is ultimately to God; (2) accountability is essential to human flourishing—that is, to achieving ends that are proper to human nature; (3) a theology of accountability holds to an interpersonal view of morality; and (4) accountability to God finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. In addition to introducing these four points, this section will mention some approaches that our theology of accountability seeks to challenge.

2.1 Accountability is ultimately to God

A belief that unites the Abrahamic faiths is that God is the ultimate authority over all. This conviction speaks to the fact that all of us are ultimately accountable to God; we all live and move and have our being as characters in a story of which God is the author. This is not to suggest that every facet of human life is wholly determined (or predetermined) by some divine script. It simply entails that it is God who objectively and truly defines what it means for each of us to be who we are, according to God’s creative purposes—purposes that, I shall argue, give us room to decide on some of our own paths.

What are some of the implications for theology that follow from asserting that accountability is ultimately to God? If we understand theology as the task of trying to speak truly about God and all things in relation to God, then one implication is that a major aim of the theological task is to develop an understanding of the character of God in God’s role as the ultimate authority. In so doing, theologians follow Israel’s calling to be a light to the world in a way that bears witness to the Lord’s reputation among the people—in a way that seeks to inspire a deep respect for God. Such respect is not obligated by an inherent divine need for human respect, lest human disrespect somehow harm who God is *in se*—who God is in, of, and from Godself eternally. Rather, we are called to respect God on the basis that God commands us to love God with an authority that serves human flourishing, one that enables us to become all that God creates and calls us to be. We can know that this authority serves human flourishing because God commands us with the very same authority that both defines human flourishing and also seeks to bring it about.

This means it is not the case, for example, that God participates with creation in some overarching story of justice according to which God has an obligation to act in certain ways according to some even higher authority, ways that could require God to do things that compete with God's creative purposes so that God can embody some higher ideal of justice. There is no abstract justice that determines God's authority; it is only God's authority that determines the nature of justice. God is the ultimate author of, and therefore authority on, justice. Therefore, one of the central purposes of a theological focus on the nexus of biblical concepts relating to justice—for example, reward and punishment, blessing and curse, sacrifice and purity, and, indeed, life and death—is to elevate God's authority in human minds for the sake of their flourishing.¹⁰ Such biblical motifs teach us, on the one hand, about the injustice of sin and the seriousness of rebelling against God, and, on the other hand, about the true value of a right relationship with God. Accordingly, I shall argue that a Christian theology of accountability, grounded in God's loving judgement, is accompanied by a primarily restorative rather than retributive vision of justice. That is, God's purposes of justice do not aim at fulfilling the requirements of some abstract justice but in bringing about the fulfilment of God's purposes of love. As Eleonore Stump writes, 'God's justice is encompassed in God's love; it is not in any way opposed to it. God's justice is simply one aspect of God's goodness and love.'¹¹

What approaches are challenged by the view that God is the ultimate authority over all? First, it challenges approaches that treat God as a character in a story told by humans. For example, it challenges approaches that regard God: (1) as a character that belongs to a particular religious tradition (rather than the other way around); (2) as a postulate for creative human stories about meaning, morality, or hope; (3) as a hypothesis who fills gaps in human explanations of the cosmos; and/or (4) as a means to an end of some story that human beings create (e.g. as a means to encourage adherence to certain ethical principles). In pointing out these potential targets, we should acknowledge that God does reveal Godself through stories that humans believe about the world. Such stories, however, do not contain or construct God; insofar as they are true, they merely witness to God's story and to God's authorship of that story. To affirm that we are ultimately accountable to God is incompatible with any suggestion that God is reducible to a character in a human story, which would imply that we have some authority over God.

Second, this point challenges the view that we are the ultimate storytellers with respect to ourselves and the cosmos in which we find ourselves. If we recognize that we are ultimately accountable to God, then we must first look to God's story (insofar as we can) to understand both who we are and who we should be as

¹⁰ See, for example, Deut. 30:19; Prov. 8:35–6.

¹¹ Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 88.

characters in God's story. It is true that, to do this, we need to draw on stories that we believe about ourselves—stories that will be informed by the natural and human sciences, by the arts, by society and culture more broadly, and by generally participating in the world. However, when we develop our stories, we always need to go a step further to think about how these stories testify to and are contained within God's story.

2.2 Accountability is essential to human flourishing

As the author of creation, God creates us to be who God creates us to be, to flourish how God creates us to flourish, under God's care and authority, and, furthermore, under the care of those to whom God delegates authority. Accordingly, we find fulfilment by being united with God, who enables us to be who we should be; that is, God enables us to be who we should be not only *by means of* but *through our participation in* the relationship of accountability to God. So, it is only with God and by the grace of God that we can become perfect. One of the places where this point is made evident is in 1 John, where it is said that knowing God is accompanied by obedience to God, and that disobeying God indicates that a person does not truly know God (1 John 2:3–4). And as we obey God's Word, for John, God's love finds expression in our lives, thereby delivering us to perfection (1 John 2:5). The love of God, therefore, is not passive but actively seeks to draw us to Godself so that we might find fulfilment by actively embodying who God creates us to be.

As creatures created in the image of God, God not only creates us to flourish by being united to God in a loving relationship of accountability but also, derivatively, by being united to one another in loving relationships of accountability wherein we help each other to fulfil our identities as beloved children of God. Again, therefore, genuine relationships of accountability are not only characterized by mutual respect but also by a mutual love in which persons of authority seek to bring about the fulfilment of persons under their authority.

What are the implications of viewing accountability as essential to human flourishing? One of the key implications we shall consider, following recent work by C. Stephen Evans, is that when people seek to respond to God's calling in their life, they will be motivated by what we shall refer to as the virtue of accountability: the virtue with which we embrace God as the ultimate authority over our lives and thus turn to God to discover who we are and should be (e.g. creatures characterized by faith, hope, and love) in our accountability to God.¹²

¹² See C. Stephen Evans, *Living Accountably* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

In light of this definition of the virtue of accountability, one could expect us to suggest that accountability is the foundational virtue, since it is with this virtue that we seek God's judgement on what other virtues we should seek to embody and, indeed, how we should seek to embody them. However, as we discuss in Chapter 3, we shall not go so far as to make this claim, because faith, love, and hope play an underlying and interconnected role in motivating persons to embrace accountability to God. This is also evident in human relationships of accountability. We embrace accountability to a person of authority out of a certain level of faith, hope, and/or love for that person, even if it is also the case that we grow in our understanding of faith, hope, and love under the authority of that person. While we can define these virtues in specific ways, they are very much intertwined with one another and, indeed, with other virtues as well. This is particularly the case when it comes to the virtue of accountability, which could be characterized as a cluster of virtues, albeit one that is held together in a distinctive way.

In affirming that accountability to God is foundational to human flourishing, I shall also argue, by implication, that rejecting accountability to God is at the root of human sin. To be enslaved to sin, to be a fallen human, is to reject divine authority in favour of embracing human authority *over against* God. It is for this reason that Aquinas notes that sin against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable because it involves us contemptuously rejecting that which delivers us from sin.¹³

In many respects, some of what I shall argue may seem quite obvious—at least, theologically speaking. I might add, however, that it is extremely difficult to grasp the gravity of resisting accountability to God—to fathom that there is nothing more harmful to human life than alienation from, rebellion against, or disrespect for God's authority. To grasp this, we need to understand, in both mind and heart, that our duty to God is a duty to ourselves, and that a fear of God is also a fear of not being who God creates us to be. As we shall consider further in Chapter 7, when Christians struggle with this point, they often become more concerned about the secondary consequences of falling away from right relationship with God. For example, Christians can sometimes be more concerned about the suffering, death, and disorder that result from resisting accountability to God—from resisting the one who is the source of flourishing, life, and proper order—than they are about being alienated from God. Consequently, throughout the history of Israel and the church, there has been a strong emphasis on extrinsic motivations rather than intrinsic motivations for embracing accountability to God. Regrettably, rather than being motivated to embrace accountability to God as an essential good *in itself* for human beings, Christians sometimes need to be motivated to embrace accountability to God with a view to gaining extrinsic

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.14.3.

reward (e.g. heavenly paradise) or avoiding some extrinsic punishment (e.g. eternal conscious torment in hell).¹⁴ This is because it can seem easier to motivate humans to buy into a theological view of flourishing when it is sold with images of physical and social flourishing, just as with children (in particular) it is sometimes easier to get them to pursue education and good behaviour if there is a punishment and reward system in place. The danger with the carrot-and-stick approach, however, is that it can risk leading Christians to treat God as a character in a human story—a story that is shaped by human thoughts of receiving extrinsic rewards and avoiding extrinsic punishments, and of a god who can be conditioned and controlled by us to this end.

To be clear, I am not here diminishing the negative consequences of sin or, indeed, the positive consequences of faith, whatever they may be. Rather, I am stressing that they are merely a consequence of the far greater harm (or intrinsic punishment) of alienation from God. I am also seeking to emphasize the value of the far greater good (or intrinsic reward) of loving fellowship with and loving accountability to God—the end for which humans were created. What our theology of accountability will argue is that, most essentially, humans are creatures that belong to God and have been created to be adopted in Christ as the children of God. It is first and foremost by embracing this identity that humans flourish.

2.3 A theology of accountability holds to an interpersonal view of morality

Another point the book shall argue is that accountability to God does not just involve God judging us according to some impersonal moral laws that define what it means to be right and just. Rather, accountability to God involves an interpersonal relationship with the triune God who gives us laws to instruct us in the justice and righteousness that God defines. On this point, let us briefly raise two general implications that our theology of accountability has for how we should think about morality—implications that follow from the previous two subsections.

First, human morality is grounded in the personal righteousness of God. It is not based on some impersonal moral principles or standard of justice, which are located on some abstract moral plane, and which define the morality of God and everything else. Accordingly, true humanity is defined by God's account of what it means to be human, and we learn what it means to be truly human in a relationship of accountability to God, under God's authority. This point is echoed in Carol Newsom's presentation of the 'fundamental grammar of the moral self'

¹⁴ For an anthropological study of how a fear of God has impacted human development, see Dominic Johnson, *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

in the Hebrew Bible as involving ‘desire, knowledge, and the discipline of submission to an external authority’.¹⁵ Knowledge of God, she argues, is ‘the basis for correct moral decision making’.¹⁶ What, by contrast, is the basis for immorality? It is being hard-hearted, which involves having a ‘stubborn and rebellious heart’ (Jer. 5:23) resistant to God’s authority and, therefore, to God’s guiding judgement. In sum, therefore, a moral wrong is an act in which a person (consciously or unconsciously) rebels against God’s authority, and a moral right is an act in which a person (consciously or unconsciously) conforms to God’s authority.

Second, a theology of accountability calls us to rethink many of the ways in which we think about punishment and reward. Any punishment that is extrinsic to the relationship of accountability to God is less harmful to humanity, according to what humanity essentially is (i.e. has been created to be), than rebellion against God’s authority. And any reward that is extrinsic to the relationship of accountability to God is less fulfilling to humanity, according to what it essentially is, than embracing God’s authority. Therefore, to direct our thinking about accountability to God away from God and towards extrinsic punishments and rewards is to diminish a theology of accountability and overlook how fundamental right relationship with God is to what it means to be human.

2.4 Accountability to God finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ

The final introductory theological point we shall consider is that accountability to God finds fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, God’s authorial Word becomes embodied within the story of creation; God the Son becomes a human subject under the authority of God the Father. By uniting the two parties in the human relationship of accountability to God, in one person, Christ brings about the fullness of human accountability to God. Consequently, Christ exists as the source of human meaning, life, righteousness, and liberty.

This has a variety of implications, many of which will be addressed in later chapters. One of the central points is that the consummation of God’s story of creation does not rest on non-divine persons embracing their accountability to God. This is because God is not simply the author of the beginning of the human story, who leaves the end of this story in human hands. Rather, in Christ, God brings about the true end of the story of creation. Consequently, it is by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ—and to the true account of humanity he embodies—that we come to embrace our accountability to God, and thus become who we are created to be. By abiding in Jesus Christ, we ‘walk in the same way in which [Jesus]

¹⁵ Carol A. Newsom, ‘Models of the Moral Self: Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 1 (2012): pp. 5–25; quotation from p. 12.

¹⁶ Newsom, ‘Models of the Moral Self’, p. 12.

walked' (1 John 2:6). It is therefore in Christ that we find our true place, our true belonging, in God's story of creation.

The other point to mention here is that God not only enters into God's story of creation. As is revealed on the cross, God also enters into the sinful story we narrate for ourselves—the sinful story that ends in death, disorder, and destruction.¹⁷ However, insofar as it is not human death but human life that is the end of Christ's story, the sinful story is exposed as a fiction—albeit a fiction that, by being treated as non-fiction, brings disorder to creation. The story of justification is thereby not one of balance and retribution, brought about when the story of Christ balances out the competing story of sin. The story of sin does not in any way compete with God's story of creation. Rather, it falls under it and is left behind by the Christological story of redemption and new creation. Again, therefore, the story of justification is a story of the restoration achieved when Jesus Christ brings about the fulfilment of human accountability to God.

3. Overview of Chapters

Mirroring the first two sections of this introduction, the book will be divided into two parts. Part I will offer a definition and analysis of the concept(s) of accountability (as a condition and a virtue). Part II will engage in the constructive work of developing a theology of accountability by discussing what it means to be accountable to God.

In Chapter 1, I begin by proposing and elaborating on the following definition of accountability: the condition of someone standing before another who has authority to judge relevant aspects of who that person is and should be relative to their role in a shared project—a project that characterizes the relationship between the two parties and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) proper to the one who is accountable. I then distinguish this definition from two other definitions of accountability: one as 'moral responsibility to' and the other as 'moral responsibility for'. In so doing, I consider how we might think about the concept of accountability in a way that differentiates it from the concept of responsibility. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the concept of accountability defined in Chapter 1 and examines four key conditions or features of accountability: (1) accountability requires a relationship in which one party has the authority to judge an aspect(s) of who the other is according to a shared project; (2) accountability requires an account of the accountable person to be communicated and accurately interpreted by the person to whom they are accountable; (3) accountability is teleological; and (4) there is an order to relationships of accountability.

¹⁷ See 2 Cor. 5:21.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of another way to use the word ‘accountability’: to refer to the virtue that characterizes those who embrace the condition of accountability (as defined in Chapter 1). In this chapter, I consider why and how accountability (i.e. our embracing accountability) can be construed as a distinctive virtue. In close connection with Chapter 3, Chapter 4 considers how accountability can be construed in a way that does not expose persons to abuse, preempting some valid concerns that may arise in response to the case we are making for accountability as a condition and a virtue. To give context to this discussion, we shall think specifically about why slavery, as a test case, is characterized by neither the condition nor the virtue of accountability. This will then lead us into a conceptual analysis of the difference between accountability and exploitation.

In Part II, we turn to the question of what it means to be accountable to God based on the concepts of accountability (as a condition and a virtue) developed in Part I. I noted earlier that accountability involves a person holding someone accountable as a character in a narrative they believe and narrate about the world. When it comes to accountability to God, however, God not only holds humans accountable according to a story that God believes, but also according to a story that God authors and narrates. Furthermore, it is on the basis of God’s authorship that accountability comes to be an essential feature of human life; God creates humans to live accountably. I shall argue, therefore, that accountability is not only a means to achieve human flourishing, but also the way for humans to flourish; that is, humans not only flourish *through* but also *in* relationships of accountability.

To come to terms with the relationship between creation and accountability to God, Chapter 5 focuses on what I take to be the core theological theme for thinking about accountability to God: God’s covenantal relationship with humanity. Before looking specifically at the theme of covenant, however, we begin with a prolegomenal discussion of theological narrative, in which I address questions relating to the purpose, distinctiveness, and pedagogical significance of a theological story. By addressing these questions, I lay out some premises that undergird our theological reflection on accountability. This will provide the context for assessing the dogmatic value of various features of the theological narrative in developing a theology of accountability.

We then offer an analysis of the concept of covenant. Given how broad and complex a discussion of this concept could become—due to the diverse ways in which the concept is construed in Scripture—there is a need to narrow the focus of our discussion. To do so, we base our discussion of covenant on what Rolf Rendtorff refers to as the covenant formula: “I am your God and you are my people.”¹⁸ Working with this formula, we discuss five areas relating to covenant

¹⁸ Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 3.

that are relevant to our theology of accountability: (1) promise and covenant; (2) the particular moral framework of covenant(s); (3) the particular place of covenant history; (4) the relationship between creation and covenant; and (5) the metaphysics of covenantal existence.

In Chapter 6, I argue that sin is grounded in a rejection of our accountability to God; that it involves us prioritizing our own judgement of who we are and who we should be over against God's account of us. I build this case through a theological reading of the Genesis account of the Fall as a story that associates the origin of sin with a fall from accountability to God. Then, in Chapter 7, I analyse one of the ways in which we can learn to live accountably to God, in the midst of sin, by exploring one of the prominent ways in which reverence for God is depicted in Scripture: as the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. Following a conceptual analysis of fear, which builds on Aquinas's presentation of fear, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the limits of fear when it comes to thinking about accountability to God.

In Chapters 8 and 9, I address the question of what it means to be accountable to God in Christ. The notion of accountability 'in Christ' is difficult to understand for a number of reasons, which we discuss. Yet I also contend that this notion is critical for understanding the theology of the apostle Paul, which we show by thinking about the applicability of our view of accountability to his theology. I argue that the best way to make sense of accountability in Christ is by understanding our participation in the Christological narrative of creation, especially as it finds expression in the life of the church, the body of Christ.

To analyse the notion of accountability in Christ within the church, Chapter 8 turns to the sacrament of baptism. I propose baptism can be interpreted as a ceremony that formally initiates a person into a new relationship of accountability to God within the church community. Upon being baptized in the name of Christ, a person takes on the title 'in Christ', which marks them out as a member of the church, the body of Christ. Consequently, the baptizand is officially welcomed into the church family, wherein they are held to an account of who they are as a child of God in Christ.

In Chapter 9, we turn to the theme of conversion to explore further what it means to be accountable to God in Christ. To do so, I begin by proposing a theological definition of conversion that is distinctive to the Christian faith. I elaborate on this definition by applying it to a contemporary debate in New Testament studies about how to construe the turn that Paul's life took following his road to Damascus experience. In so doing, I argue that while it can be helpful to make Paul's turn a focal point in the story of his accountability to God, we better represent his story when we make it primarily about the one God who holds him accountable and, furthermore, the one in whom Paul is held accountable, Jesus Christ. This requires us to index the story of Paul's life to the Christological stories of creation and reconciliation.

PART I

THE CONCEPT OF
ACCOUNTABILITY

A Definition of Accountability

Who can provide the best account of who I am and who I should be? For many people, the *prima facie* answer to this question will be ‘me’. Even for the religious believer who answers ‘God’, the ‘me’ will likely follow close behind, informing their perspective. This is because, in many respects, ‘I’ seem to be the one with the best insight into my innermost thoughts, beliefs, values, desires, goals, intentions, and so on. Veridical insights into these things would seem fundamental to developing a good account of who I am.¹

At the same time, most of us recognize there are others who can help us to form a better account of ourselves, relative to certain ends and values. We often turn to experts or authorities—such as doctors, teachers, religious representatives, or therapists—to receive insight into certain aspects of who we are and should be relative to certain ends, whether those ends be related to health, education, spirituality, or something else. When we do so, we are motivated by trust in their specific expertise, intelligence, virtue, or some other attribute we respect and regard as relevant. This trust is motivated by beliefs about ourselves, which are defined according to certain life views, ends, and values. This means, for example, that whereas some will choose to go to a medical doctor, others opt for a homeopath; some go to lawyers, others to local gang leaders; some go to psychiatrists, others to exorcists; and where some seek out a priest, others turn to the nearest pub (or both).

Given the huge diversity of worldviews, the question arises as to where our beliefs about ourselves come from. After all, while each of us plays a role in shaping our beliefs, they are not formed in a vacuum. The answer to this question is that, as social creatures, our beliefs, ends, and values develop through growing up in communities that inform and shape our accounts of who we are and should be. Our accounts of ourselves are informed by our community’s scientific, cultural, moral, and religious accounts of our place in the world. Some of these accounts will be true, some false, some helpful, and some destructive. Whatever the case, when we receive these accounts and grow into them, we come to embody the accounts that others have of us, albeit in our own unique ways. And when these accounts give our lives the direction and meaning we embrace, we become characters in the narratives of others. Not only do others interpret who we are

¹ The extreme version of this is described by Charles Taylor as the ‘buffered self’, which refers to self-enclosed individuals who view themselves as the ground of their meaning. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 29–41.

according to their narratives, and not only are we shaped by the guiding influence of their narratives, but, to a certain extent, we come to interpret ourselves according to their narratives—we internalize their narratives.² This is because, like it or not, most of us care deeply about how certain people judge us, relative to certain aspects of our lives. Their insight encourages us to interpret ourselves in particular ways and take our lives in particular directions. When this relational dynamic serves to elevate us in positive ways, in roles that are proper to us, it expresses that our lives are characterized by what we shall refer to as ‘accountability’, which we shall now seek to define.

In view of the circumstances I have just outlined, I shall propose the following definition of accountability. This definition draws upon the understanding that accountability involves two parties—the *accountor* (the one to whom one is accountable) and the *accountee* (the one who is accountable).³ Thus:

accountability (between persons) is the condition of someone (the accountee) standing in relation to another (the accountor) who has an authority to judge relevant aspects of who the accountee is and should be relative to their role in a shared project; a project that characterizes the relationship between the accountor and the accountee and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to the accountee.⁴

Part I of this book will offer a detailed analysis of this concept of accountability. In so doing, it will consider various examples of accountability that provide further context for this definition and will illustrate the rationale for this interpretation. Prior to this, some further initial work needs to be undertaken to help us gain a better grasp of this concept. In the next section, we shall begin by illustrating this definition as it relates to the context of a doctor–patient relationship, a relationship that challenges certain assumptions about how the term ‘accountability’ should and should not be used. We shall then go on to distinguish our definition of accountability from two prominent ways of thinking about accountability, one in philosophy, and one in theology.

² For further discussion of how the stories of others impact the stories we believe about ourselves and, therefore, of how we understand our personal identities, see Kate McLean, *The Co-authored Self: Family Stories and the Construction of Personal Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ These terms have been used previously by Harald Bergsteiner and Gayle C. Avery in their article ‘Responsibility and Accountability: Towards an Integrative Process Model’, *International Business and Economics Research Journal* 2, no. 2 (2003): pp. 31–40.

⁴ To understand this definition, this book will think carefully about the following: (1) the posture of the accountee towards an accountor; (2) the nature of an accountor’s authority; (3) how an accountor should interpret who an accountee is and should be; and (4) what ends are proper to an accountee. Also, to construe this definition theologically, we shall seek to understand these things according to the following three premises I laid out in the introduction: (1) all authority ultimately comes from God; (2) God’s narrative is the one true narrative according to which we should judge all other narratives; and (3) each of us is ultimately accountable to God.

1. Accountability between a Doctor and a Patient

If we apply our definition of accountability to the doctor–patient relationship, we can say that the doctor (*qua* accountee) is accountable to a patient (*qua* accountor) insofar as a patient has legitimate authority to judge relevant aspects of who a doctor is and should be relative to the shared project of practising medicine, thereby serving the doctor’s aim of offering care that is suitable for their patients. Or we can also say that the patient (*qua* accountee) is accountable to the doctor (*qua* accountor) insofar as the doctor has legitimate authority to judge relevant aspects of who a patient is and should be relative to the shared project of medical treatment, which serves certain (health-related) goals for the patient.

In the relationship between doctor and patient, neither party has a neutral account of who the other should be. When a patient decides to go to a doctor, it is normally out of a perception that the doctor has an epistemic authority to make constructive judgements about who they are and should be with respect to the state of their health (as persons who are physically embodied). Also, when doctors are receptive to feedback from a patient, it is because they trust that a patient has a certain authority to make constructive judgements about who they are and should be as a health practitioner.

What do I mean by authority here?⁵ In a relationship of accountability, an accountor has legitimate authority if they have an ability or power to make good and proper judgements about who an accountee is and should be in their role in a shared project. Such authority could be practical: an authority to make certain demands of an accountee (e.g. a parent’s authority to send their child to bed). It could be epistemic, grounded in a superior knowledge that can support an accountee’s flourishing (e.g. the doctor’s medical knowledge of an accountee’s condition). Or it could be both (e.g. the teacher has a practical authority to demand that the student does their homework, and an epistemic authority to judge the student’s performance in their homework).

There are, however, challenges when it comes to discerning whether an accountor possesses *legitimate* authority in relationship to an accountee. When it comes to practical authority, it will not always be clear what demands an accountor can legitimately make of an accountee. Therefore, careful reflection is needed on what an accountor with practical authority can legitimately demand from an accountee. And such reflection should be shaped by a commitment to ensuring that the accountor’s authority serves an accountee’s role within a shared project. Also, in the case of epistemic authority, it can be difficult to work out whether an

⁵ It would also be possible for us to use the word ‘standing’ in place of ‘authority’. For further discussion of the concept of standing, which echoes our use of ‘authority’, see James Edwards, ‘Standing to Hold Responsible’, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16 (2019): pp. 437–62.

accountor genuinely knows what is best for an accountee, especially if they have not spent much time together.

Consequently, in the context of a relationship between the doctor and the patient, it can be important for a doctor not to assume authority too quickly, since they may not know what is best for a patient until they have heard the patient's own judgements about their health situation. Nevertheless, appropriate medical care will require doctors to take a view on what is good or bad for a patient. If doctors were to avoid forming and offering opinions about patients, perhaps out of a concern to avoid being paternalistic, it would be much harder for the patient to make good judgements about what is best for them—indeed, this could well lead patients to make bad judgements when it comes to their medical treatment. That doctors take their own specific views on aspects of who a patient is and should be is, therefore, a vital part of medical practice, especially when a patient is not in a state to offer an account of their personal health goals. So, rather than doctors striving to be unopinionated, it is reasonable to think it is better for doctors to try to be cognizant of and transparent about their partialities with respect to a patient's health. By so doing, they can focus on thinking carefully and critically about how best to negotiate their partialities in service of a specific patient's goals.

If an accountor does not think carefully and critically about the nature and limits of their particular authority, it becomes easy for them to abuse their specific roles. For example, there are many respects in which a doctor *qua* doctor does not have legitimate authority to make judgements about the patient *qua* patient, and vice versa. On the one hand, a doctor should not judge a patient based on an account of the patient as someone who can avoid unavoidable diseases, has no opinion about their health, or strictly conforms to the doctor's preconceived notions of patients. On the other hand, the patient should not judge the doctor based on an account of that doctor as someone who can cure the incurable, be at their beck and call, or has no right to give them lifestyle advice when it comes to their health. In recognizing the bilateral nature of the doctor–patient relationship here, it is hopefully clear that accountability can and often should involve a reciprocity between an accountor and an accountee. Accountability does not necessarily entail a strictly paternalistic or, indeed, authoritarian relationship between an accountor and accountee, which could easily become abusively controlling and degrading.⁶ That said, while a doctor–patient relationship of accountability may be reciprocal, this does not imply that an accountor and

⁶ In the field of medicine, the ideal aim is to create informed consent, meaning patients are fully informed of the risks and benefits, and doctors do not have any privileged information the patient does not have. This, however, is a theoretical ideal and, practically speaking, it is not realistic to expect doctors to achieve this aim. For an interesting discussion of some of the challenges with bringing about informed consent, see Rebecca Kukla, 'Conscientious Autonomy: Displacing Decisions in Health Care', *Hastings Centre Report* 35, no. 2 (2005): pp. 34–44; L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 136–40.

an accountee will have an equivalent level of authority. Normally, one side of the relationship will play a more authoritative role, depending on the nature of the shared project.⁷

The doctor–patient relationship is a salutary example for this project, since this book will not merely be treating accountability as a condition that concerns morally obligatory projects—for example, a patient need not be under a moral obligation to follow a doctor’s judgement about what they should do. Accordingly, I shall resist the inclination to reduce accountability to a condition that is overly focused on the begetting of moral praise or blame, moral punishment or reward, and so on. Instead, I shall understand it more broadly as a condition of being in a relation to an accountant who can judge an accountee in a way that helps them to grow and flourish relative to a shared project and, indeed, a shared teleology which need not be characterized by moral obligations.

Placing our concept of accountability in this broader context sets it apart from some common conceptions of it in the world of philosophy and theology. In these disciplines, it is typical to understand accountability to mean something akin to ‘moral responsibility to’ or ‘moral responsibility for’.⁸ For example, when we say that a person is *accountable for* X, it is often being suggested that they are *morally responsible for* X. In this respect, ‘accountable for’ and ‘morally responsible for’ often implies ‘morally culpable for’ or ‘morally blameworthy for’. Similarly, when we say that a person is *accountable to* person Y, we often mean that the person is *morally responsible to* person Y. Here, ‘accountable to’ and ‘morally responsible to’ can both mean (loosely) that a person ‘has a moral obligation to’ person Y. Thomas Bivins offers the following view of accountability that is representative of many of the ways in which people think about accountability:

The simplest formula is that a person can be held accountable if (1) the person is functionally and/or morally responsible for an action, (2) some harm occurred due to that action, and (3) the responsible person had no legitimate excuse for that action.⁹

⁷ The balance between these two roles will vary depending on the context in which a shared project is situated. For example, when the doctor–patient relationship is more of a consumer-driven relationship, patients will likely have a higher authority to make judgements about the medical treatment (service) they are given by doctors (service providers). In a context where there is a more classical paternalistic approach to medicine, patients will typically have less authority to make judgements about their treatment and will be more likely to trust the doctor’s expert judgement. I am grateful to Robert Torrance for making this point to me.

⁸ For further comparison of accountability to other closely connected terms, see Evans, *Living Accountably* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 4–5, 27–35. In addition to offering further discussion of the relationship between ‘responsibility’ and ‘accountability’, Evans also compares ‘accountability’ to ‘answerability’. Angela Smith also offers a helpful comparison between the concept of accountability and ‘answerability’ and ‘attributability’. Angela Smith, ‘Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: In Defense of a Unified Account’, *Ethics* 122 (2012): pp. 575–89.

⁹ Thomas Bivins, ‘Responsibility and Accountability’, in *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*, ed. K. Fitzpatrick and C. Bronstein (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 21.

We shall not rule out the possibility that accountability can be used to mean something along these lines. Indeed, any representative definition of accountability should have at least some overlap with certain definitions of responsibility and will involve some form of responsibility. For example, on this definition, we could say that the accountor and the accountee are responsible (i.e. have obligations) to one another for fulfilling their specific roles in a shared project. Moreover, there are ways in which this understanding of accountability is identifiable with some ways of thinking about responsibility, particularly in theology.¹⁰ In short, there is substantial semantic overlap or common ground between the ways the two terms are used. Yet it is also possible to define ‘accountability’ in a way that makes it significantly distinct from ‘responsibility’, and which enables it to function as a uniquely important concept for the task of theology. It is the task of this chapter to elaborate on the definition I am proposing and make an initial case for it.

In the rest of this chapter, we consider how our view complements but also differs from two contemporary views of accountability, before going on to say a little more about our distinctive interpretation of accountability. First, I differentiate our interpretation from Stephen Darwall’s philosophical interpretation of accountability as ‘moral responsibility to’. Second, I contrast our view to Jesse Couenhoven’s theological interpretation of accountability as ‘moral responsibility for’. I then elaborate on what is especially distinctive about our concept of accountability, giving specific attention to its emphasis on the accountor’s role in holding an accountee to an account of who they should be, relative to a shared project. As I suggest, a key distinction between ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’ is that ‘accountability’ is specifically concerned with an ‘account’ of a person.

2. Stephen Darwall on Accountability as ‘Moral Responsibility To’

In *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Stephen Darwall offers an interpretation of accountability as ‘moral responsibility to’. More specifically, he presents accountability as a condition involving a first-person duty to someone in the second-person standpoint—a duty ‘I’ have to

¹⁰ For example, our view of accountability echoes many of the ways in which Karl Barth uses (*Mit*) *Verantwortung*, which his translators translate as ‘responsibility’. Accordingly, our view also aligns with some of the ways in which theologians influenced by (English translations of) Barth talk about responsibility. That said, I would argue that, at some points in Barth’s writing, it is better to translate (*Mit*) *Verantwortung* as ‘accountability’. Indeed, Gerald McKenny makes precisely this move in *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth’s Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). McKenny translates Barth’s use of *Verantwortung* as ‘responsibility’ at some points, but also retranslates it as ‘accountability’ or ‘answerability’ at other points. For further discussion on Barth’s view of responsibility and accountability, see also Gerald McKenny’s excellent discussion of this in *Karl Barth’s Moral Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 126–50.

'you'. Drawing on the work of P. F. Strawson, Darwall develops this view based on his understanding of the normative reactive attitudes that characterize interpersonal relationships, such as resentment, guilt, blame, and indignation.¹¹ What makes reactive attitudes relevant for his purposes is that they 'invariably presuppose the authority to hold someone responsible and make demands of him.'¹² As such, 'ethical notions that are distinctively relevant to [reactive] attitudes—the culpable, moral responsibility, and, I argue, moral obligation—all have an irreducibly second-personal aspect that ties them conceptually to second-personal reasons [i.e., reasons that are "grounded in (*de jure*) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee"]'.¹³

To understand Darwall's position better, it will be helpful to consider it in the context of a specific example he uses: that of a person who stands on another person's foot. Darwall points out that when a person stands on your foot, causing you pain, you have legitimate authority to demand they stop doing so.¹⁴ Consequently, if that person refuses to remove their foot in response to your demand (which expresses a normative reactive attitude), an injustice occurs: a rejection of your legitimate demand and your valid authority to make that demand.¹⁵ This injustice speaks to a specific moral dimension to relationships of accountability: it is immoral to reject the demand of an accountor with legitimate authority to make that demand. To reject such a demand is to disrespect a person to whom one is accountable. When someone disregards your demand not to stand on your foot, 'this is an injury not just to your foot, but also to your person. It is a failure to respect your standing or dignity as someone who may not be so treated and who has the standing as one among others to hold others to this'.¹⁶

There are ways in which our interpretation of accountability resonates with Darwall's view. We both agree, for example, that accountability involves a relationship in which an accountor has an authority to expect an accountee to behave in a certain way towards them—meaning that an accountee has a duty not to dismiss an accountor's request that they behave in a certain way. Yet there are also key differences. While Darwall's view is highly sophisticated, it is also, in some respects, more minimal (i.e. less substantive) than the one we are proposing. For him, accountability primarily involves a 'mutual respect of the equal dignity of free and rational persons' and aims to achieve 'the ideal of equal respect'.¹⁷ We can agree that such respect is important to human relationships of accountability, while disagreeing that equal respect is simply an end in itself in relationships of

¹¹ See P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): pp. 1–25.

¹² Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 17.

¹³ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 17, 4.

¹⁴ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 2–10.

¹⁶ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 68.

¹⁷ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 84.

accountability. Equal respect is important because it helps the accountant and accountee to work together for the sake of achieving an end that is proper to the accountee. Because of this, an accountant does not merely want an accountee to respect their dignity as an end in itself. The accountant also desires the accountee's respect so they can use their authority to help the accountee become who they should be—that is, who they should be relative to the end(s) the accountant has authority to help them achieve (this end could involve becoming more respectful but could also be something else). So, for example, according to our interpretation of accountability, a doctor is not primarily concerned about whether a patient respects their dignity; rather, the doctor desires the patient's respect so that the patient will be receptive to their advice on how to achieve personal health.

Influenced by P. F. Strawson's anti-consequentialism, Darwall argues that the question of whether accountability serves the (consequential) flourishing of an accountee is beside the point.¹⁸ What matters is primarily that the accountee respects the dignity of the accountant. By contrast, on our view, the accountee has a duty to respect the authority of an accountant, not only out of respect for the accountant, but also out of respect for themselves. This is because the authority of an accountant serves the flourishing of the accountee; that is, it helps them to achieve ends that are proper to who they are. To put this in the context of Darwall's example, an accountant is not primarily concerned about an accountee disrespecting them by standing on their foot. Ideally, their primary concern (*qua* accountant) should be to help deliver the accountee from their harmful foot-stamping ways—according to a shared project of teaching respect. Theologically, this is motivated by the accountant's love for the accountee as their neighbour.

To be clear, by tying relationships of accountability to their potential consequences, I am not suggesting that accountability is valuable simply because it generates positive consequences. Rather, I am making a descriptive point: I am describing accountability as a condition that aims at achieving certain ends for the accountee. If this is not happening, it is a sign that the relationship of accountability is, to some extent, dysfunctional. In a doctor–patient relationship of accountability, for example, if the doctor does not use their specific authority to serve the health goals of the patient, then something is wrong (assuming that it is the patient's health goals that shape the relationship of accountability). It is of course possible for a patient's condition to worsen within a legitimate relationship of accountability, even if the doctor is doing all they can to help the patient. If this happens, however, it does so in spite of the fact that the doctor is seeking to facilitate the patient's flourishing. That the doctor is unsuccessful simply means there are limits to their specific relationship of accountability; there are limits to the doctor's authority when it comes to helping the patient fulfil their personal health goals.

¹⁸ See Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 15–17.

In addition to proposing a view of accountability as a condition that serves the flourishing of an accountee (i.e. serves their proper ends), I also interpret human flourishing as intrinsic to—and not simply a consequence of—relationships of accountability. That is, as I shall argue further in later chapters, there are theological reasons to think that human flourishing is generated (i.e. proper human ends are met) not just *through* but *in* relationships of accountability. This is not only because accountability is characterized by mutual respect, which maintains that the accountee has a duty or obligation to act in a way that recognizes the authority of their accountant. It is also because, when understood theologically, accountability is characterized by a neighbourly love with which the accountee and the accountant love one another in their respective roles. That is, respect and love are characteristic of the relationships of accountability for which humans are created.

In such a relationship of accountability, the accountee does not simply desire to be with the accountant *as a means to* their own flourishing. Rather, the accountee desires to be with them because they see the relationship of accountability as *itself* a way of flourishing rather than simply a means to it. In making this point, we can agree with Darwall that an accountee must respect an accountant as an end in themselves.¹⁹ However, our view goes a step further by saying that, before God, an excellent relationship of accountability is also characterized by an accountee loving an accountant as an end in themselves, and not just as a means to achieving another end.

What is the basis for going this step further? Since love, and not just respect, could appear to have very little to do with most relationships of accountability, it would be easy to see our view as eccentric and idealistic. Indeed, it may well seem odd to suggest that love is critical to relationships of accountability. As Darwall himself writes:

Whereas respect as an equal moral person is something we all have standing to claim from one another, love is not something we can claim. The point is not just that we have no standing to *claim* love from just anyone. We are not in a position to claim love even from those with whom we are in loving relations.²⁰

He also writes later:

[Love] cannot be legitimately claimed or demanded . . . love is not an attitude we can be held *accountable* or answerable for having.²¹

¹⁹ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 296 n. 34, 308.

²⁰ Stephen Darwall, 'Love's Second-Personal Character: Reciprocal Holding, Beholding and Upholding', in *Love, Reason and Morality*, ed. Esther Engels Kroeker and Katrien Schaubroeck (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 95.

²¹ Darwall, 'Love's Second-Personal Character', p. 100.

It is easy to see why an accountee has a duty to respect an accountant; it is less obvious why an accountee has a duty to *love* an accountant, especially if we base our understanding of accountability on reactive attitudes. As Søren Kierkegaard acknowledges in his book on the human duty to love, the notion of a duty to love can seem disturbing and even offensive.²² Practically speaking, it perhaps does not require too much imagination to recognize that love for an accountant can increase the extent to which an accountee embraces their accountability to them, in a way that complements respect. Yet, even if one is willing to acknowledge this point, this practical implication does not provide justification for the suggestion that an accountee has a duty to love an accountant.

The basis for our view, as indicated in the introductory chapter, is not pragmatic but theological. I am arguing that, before God, relationships of accountability unite persons with one another in a way that fulfils an end for which God creates them: to be persons who love one another. How does this relate to our definition of accountability? In a true relationship of accountability, the accountant's authority to judge an accountee requires them to judge the accountee as someone to be loved. Further, the posture of the accountee towards an accountant should also be characterized by love. Under these circumstances, an accountee will be delighted to act according to the authority of the accountant, and the accountant will be delighted to help the accountee achieve their goals. The stronger the love between an accountant and accountee, the stronger the relationship of accountability. This kind of loving relationship expresses that God creates humans to be united in mutually defining service to one another—in relationships in which accountors use their gifts to serve the growth and flourishing of accountees, and accountees humbly embrace this service. This end is most fully realized when relationships of accountability are grounded in accountability to God, who defines how we should shape one another. In light of our theological view that accountability is a good in itself, I shall argue in Chapter 3 that right relationships of accountability are accompanied by a virtue of accountability. This virtue is the accountee's disposition to embrace being accountable to others and, in so doing, fulfil their role in a relationship of accountability.

So, the main reason that our view differs from Darwall's is that whereas Darwall's view is grounded in a secular philosophical narrative, ours is grounded in a Christian theological narrative. On our approach, accountability to God is foundational to our understanding of whether other forms of accountability are right or wrong, good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate. On Darwall's account, the legitimacy and rationale of accountability are subject to a moral framework that is

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 25. For an excellent philosophical reflection of Kierkegaard's account of the duty to love, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Human Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

normative and discernible by rational human thought (as he understands it). This framework finds expression in, but is not grounded in, communities that are characterized by equal accountability between rational and autonomous beings. What does Darwall mean by equal accountability? In his words:

One should not act in ways that one demands or expects (or would demand or expect) that others not act, or equivalently, in ways that one would resent or object to. If I am going to object to others' stepping on my feet (and thus demand that they not do so), then I must not step on their feet either. Lincoln's famous remark, 'As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master' is along the same lines: As I would not allow others a master's claim on me so should I not make a master's claim on others.²³

Darwall further qualifies this statement by asserting that 'one should not act in ways that one [rationally and legitimately] demands or expects . . . that others not act'.²⁴ If one is a masochist, for example, this does not make it more permissible for one to cause another pain—for example, by standing on their foot. That said, while Darwall acknowledges that accountability must be characterized by rational and legitimate demands, he consciously leaves open the question of what counts as rational and legitimate within a relationship of accountability.²⁵ This open question is picked up by C. Stephen Evans in an article where he shows that Darwall could be more successful if his position were rooted in a theological and/or moral realism. With a theological basis, 'moral obligations would then be grounded in actual demands . . . [and] not merely in the hypothetical demands of an idealized moral community'.²⁶ This foundation would enable Darwall to make firmer judgements about who has (il)legitimate authority to make demands of an accountee. Without such a basis, Evans points out, it is difficult for Darwall to distinguish clearly between 'a moral claim' and 'the demands of a bully'.²⁷ This is no minor point. It should go without saying that human beings are often inept judges of who has legitimate authority. It is a fact of the (sinful) human situation that persons gain power and then use that power to 'legitimize' their 'authority' in

²³ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 117, citing Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832–1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), p. 484.

²⁴ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 117.

²⁵ For example, Darwall acknowledges that 'it seems possible for a slaveholder in the antebellum South coherently to have believed, however mistakenly or unjustifiably, that his slave could be expected to endorse his claim to authority over them'. He then adds that his claim 'is only that any address of a second-personal reason, including any from a master to a slave, is committed to the presupposition that addresser and addressee share an equal normative standing as free and rational persons'. Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 268.

²⁶ C. Stephen Evans, 'Does Darwall's Morality of Accountability Require Moral Realism? (And Would It Be Strengthened by Adding God to the Story?)', *Religions* 12, no. 187 (2021): pp. 1–9; quotation from p. 2.

²⁷ Evans, 'Does Darwall's Morality of Accountability Require Moral Realism?', p. 3.

whatever way they choose—perhaps even with their own show of ‘respect’ for ‘rationality’, ‘equality’, and ‘autonomy’.²⁸

With God (who is necessarily good) undergirding our understanding of the way things should be, however, there is a secure ground for distinguishing between valid and invalid authority. That said, this does not imply that theists will always be better interpreters of legitimate authority. This is evident, for example, in the history of ‘Christian’ support of slavery, the German Christian movement’s support of Nazi ideology, the church’s support of colonialism under the banner of ‘mission’, and the countless other ways in which Christians abuse positions of power, and, moreover, do so in the name of God. The demonstrable ways in which Christians misjudge their authority under God, however, does not call into question that God provides a firm basis for authority. They simply highlight the severity and pervasiveness of human confusion (due, in part, to ambiguities in our perceptions of God’s revelation), and the serious need for careful and accurate theological interpretation of the nature of human authority under God.

I am not here trying to construct a moral argument for the existence of God—insofar as this book is a work of theology, we can presuppose there is a God to talk about. Rather, I am drawing attention to this limitation in Darwall’s account in order to re-emphasize the need to think critically about the nature of the authority that underlies relationships of accountability, lest accountability become a way to reinforce oppressive power structures. On the one hand, Darwall argues, if we are to ‘make claims on and demands of one another at all . . . you and I must presuppose that we share a common second-personal authority, competence, and responsibility simply as free and rational agents’.²⁹ On the other hand, when it comes to his view of accountability, he acknowledges there is room to interpret such terms as ‘authority’, ‘freedom’, ‘rationality’, as well as ‘equality’.³⁰ As will hopefully become clear over the course of this book, our view of accountability is more insistent that a theologically substantive interpretation of these terms is vital to proper relationships of accountability, which means they must be understood according to God’s creative purposes.

Are there any reasons why one might object to such an interpretation of accountability? As we shall see, it would not be difficult for someone to misuse our definition of accountability in a way that could facilitate the unfair treatment of certain groups. Consequently, in the following chapters, I shall offer a number of examples as to why accurate interpretation of the various components of a relationship of accountability is vital for ensuring that such a relationship is legitimate. But let us consider an initial theological example with some historical precedent—evidenced, for example, in the institution of slavery, which we shall

²⁸ These terms are in inverted commas to indicate that we are using these terms relativistically.

²⁹ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 5.

³⁰ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 263–8.

consider further in Chapter 4.³¹ Suppose that a religious believer held that all persons are created 'equal' under God, but that various persons have different roles that distinguish them from one another according to the order of creation. Without going into concrete examples for the moment, such a believer could argue that although Black people and white people, and males and females, are equal, it is also the case that God creates them to play different roles within creation. These different roles could mean, for example, that, relative to certain projects, white people generally have authority over Black people, and men generally have authority over women. To stress the equality within these relationships, one might even claim these differences enable different persons to complement one another. Such a position is entirely compatible with Darwall's minimal view of accountability, even if it would be incompatible with some of his other, more substantive views.

While there are inappropriate ways to elevate authority in relationships of accountability, we can also recognize there is a need for an asymmetry in these relationships. While two persons might share an equal authority on a general level (e.g. to make certain claims on and demands of one another),³² there are relationships of accountability in which it is proper for accountors to have an authority specific to their role in a relationship—for example, between a parent and a child, a teacher and a student, a doctor and a patient, or, to refer to Darwall's own example, between a sergeant and a private.³³ While such persons share an equal accountability with respect to their equal dignity as ends in themselves, there are valid reasons to recognize that an accountor has an authority that an accountee does not have. Darwall also recognizes this point. Again, however, he is primarily concerned with the respect that an accountee owes to the accountor with authority, whereas our view is also concerned with how this respect serves the ends of an accountee.

In conclusion, our view of accountability is distinct from Darwall's because, for theological reasons, I propose that the accountor will need to have a more substantive account of who an accountee should be. As we shall in Section 4 below, when there is an informed focus on the accountor's account of an accountee, it is easier to distinguish 'accountability' from Darwall's understanding of 'moral responsibility to'. This way of thinking becomes particularly relevant when accountability is defined in light of our accountability to God—to the one

³¹ As Darwall acknowledges: 'Nothing I have said...entails that slavery or similar practices are necessarily conceptually confused or pragmatically contradictory.' Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 265. Then, a few pages later: 'it seems possible for a slaveholder in the antebellum South coherently to have believed, however mistakenly or unjustifiably, that his slaves could be expected rationally to endorse his claim to authority over them. After all, he might have thought, he had rightfully acquired them in accordance with procedures that could be rationally endorsed, from a perspective of freedom and equality, by anyone!' Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 268.

³² See Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, pp. 48, 121, 127 n. 13, 137, 242.

³³ Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 267.

who is the foundation of all authority, and the basis of any true account of each and every person.

3. Jesse Couenhoven on Accountability as ‘Moral Responsibility For’

Let us now turn from a prominent analysis of accountability in philosophy to one in theology: Jesse Couenhoven’s analysis in *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology*. Couenhoven, like Darwall, identifies accountability with a particular way of thinking about responsibility. However, rather than focusing on moral responsibility *to* another person, he focuses on a person’s moral responsibility *for* their actions, attitudes, and beliefs. More specifically, he is concerned about whether a person is liable to be called to account for an action, attitude, or belief that is worthy of praise or blame.³⁴ When thinking about accountability in this way, it is more difficult to distinguish it from moral responsibility—it is not straightforward to distinguish ‘accountability for an action’ from ‘moral responsibility for an action’. Nonetheless, Couenhoven does have some things to say about accountability that are worth comparing to our view, and which will help us further distinguish the concept.

Central to Couenhoven’s Augustinian reflection on accountability is the question of whether an action, attitude, or belief can be properly attributed to a person. He argues that it is only fair to hold a person accountable for an action, attitude, or belief that is genuinely attributable to them.³⁵ To elaborate on his view, Couenhoven turns to the metaphor of the ledger. He supposes that ‘each of us has a ledger—a personal account sheet—on which are registered all of the right, wrong, good, and bad actions and states of affairs that are properly attributed to us’.³⁶ Theologically, he proposes that we can think of such a ledger as existing in

³⁴ Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 112. In a definition that is representative of how ‘accountability for’ tends to be understood in philosophy, Christopher Evans Franklin writes: ‘An agent *S* is morally accountable for performing an action ϕ =_{df.} *S* would deserve praise if ϕ went beyond what could be reasonably expected of *S*, and *S* would deserve blame if ϕ was morally wrong.’ Christopher Evan Franklin, *A Minimal Libertarianism: Free Will and the Promise of Reduction Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 35. (In a footnote to this definition, Franklin also equates his understanding of accountability with moral responsibility.)

³⁵ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 120. For example, Couenhoven does not think a person is accountable for an action that is purely accidental (‘because mere causal involvement is not enough for an act to be ascribed to a person’). Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, pp. 118–19. Also, he does not think that a person is accountable for an action that was a consequence of insanity (because such an act is not performed by a properly functioning person, who can properly take ownership of their actions). However, he does think that a properly functioning person is accountable for an action that is intentional. In the latter case, a person has ownership of the action, which makes it attributable to that person and so liable to be held to account for it. Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 118.

³⁶ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 118.

the mind of God, in relation to whom a person's actions are judged either positively or negatively. He clarifies this point in a statement we shall go on to rethink below:

To have negative marks in one's ledger *is* to be alienated in various ways from God; to have positive marks in one's ledger *is* to draw closer to God.³⁷

These marks are not considered independently from one another but are taken together to form a narrative. For Couenhoven, this narrative shapes how 'we assess what we are accountable for and how that reflects on us'.³⁸ There is much more to say about Couenhoven's position, and we cannot do justice to the nuance and depth of it with this brief overview. However, the primary reason for considering his position is to help us to distinguish how we shall be thinking about accountability.

So how is our position distinct from Couenhoven's? In Couenhoven's discussion, which focuses specifically on responsibility for sin, accountability concerns a person's past actions, as well as the emotional, motivational, and epistemic states that underlie them.³⁹ Couenhoven focuses on the question of whether such actions are blameworthy or praiseworthy, punishable or meriting reward. Accountability, he writes, 'applies only to what we have already done or not done. Thus, responsibility as accountability is a retrospective notion'.⁴⁰ When thinking purely about the past actions for which a person is accountable, this seems indisputable; a person cannot be accountable for an act they have not yet performed. Furthermore, it is easy to see why Couenhoven thinks it makes sense to judge a person according to their past actions. Generally speaking, humans form accounts of particular persons based on the disclosure of their past actions.

What limitations might there be to this way of thinking about accountability? Couenhoven's position is limited if, as I am arguing, our account of a person should concern more than the sum of their past actions, as recordable on a ledger.⁴¹ As Couenhoven himself points out, albeit with some ambiguity, 'we hold each other accountable for not just our choices, or our selves insofar as we have self-reflexively developed them, but simply for who we are as persons'.⁴² Despite making this point, he remains committed to a view of accountability according to which a judge defines accountees according to their past, as recordable on a ledger. That is, whether one *is* alienated from God or *is* closer to God

³⁷ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 118 (emphasis mine).

³⁸ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 119.

³⁹ See Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 129.

⁴⁰ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 112.

⁴¹ In highlighting this point, I acknowledge that Couenhoven does not generally reduce a person to the sum of their past actions; it is only his view of accountability that risks doing this.

⁴² Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 127.

appears to be determined by whether one *has* negative or positive marks on one's ledger, based on past actions.⁴³

Given that accountability is an action-centred concept, it is understandable how this view of accountability comes about. Indeed, this way of thinking is perhaps the most common way to think about 'accountability for'. Typically, to hold a person accountable for X involves: (1) holding a person to account based on their past action X (relative to an account of who they should be); (2) labelling them accordingly (e.g. as a moral paragon or offender); with the aim of (3) dispensing praise or blame and, in some cases, rewards and punishments. It is not hard to see how holding persons accountable in this way encourages approaches that risk reducing persons to the sum of their past actions, whether praiseworthy or not.⁴⁴ This risk is heightened when accountability is informed by the so-called 'scales of justice', according to which a person's worth is judged according to their actions in order to dispense a proportional reward or punishment. Against this view, I am proposing that, rather than treating praise or blame, reward or punishment, as the end of a relationship of accountability, the primary aim should be the end(s) of the shared project—that is, the shared end(s) *of* and/or *for* the accountee. With this aim in mind, we are in a better position to value an accountee as an end in themselves rather than as a means to restoring some moral balance.

This means, for example, that when an accountee falls short, the ultimate aim of the accountant's response should be restoration rather than simply retribution. If, for example, an accountee were to commit a serious crime, then society (as an accountant) should seek to help the accountee to become someone who would never commit such a crime again, thereby helping them to become an upstanding member of society. Also, insofar as the accountee is identified with society (the *polis*), it may be that, as a result of their crime, the accountee is designated with the role of a prisoner, where a key and, indeed, important function of this designated role is to deter crime. This could be aimed at the shared end of contributing to the proper functioning of society. In this example, a person's restoration and the deterrent function of their role may well involve punishment—which is likely, in turn, to involve a retributive element. What is important to stress, however, is that any such punishment must always serve to sustain their flourishing and should be conceived with that end in view. By helping them to become upstanding, their

⁴³ Couenhoven's emphasis on the judgement of persons according to their past is especially evident in his presentation of how some people view those with dementia. As Couenhoven notes, 'patients with dementia are often said not to be themselves'—where an account of 'themselves' is informed by an account of their past activities. Moreover, he goes on to say, 'Severe memory loss can chip away at a self to the point where there is nothing left. Even in less extreme cases, malfunctioning beliefs and loves disclose nothing about the personalities of the persons who have them.' Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ While I have drawn attention to particular aspects of Couenhoven's presentation of accountability that are in danger of doing this, it is certainly not the case that his overall argument reduces a person's identity to the sum of their past actions. Couenhoven quite clearly recognizes that a person's identity is defined by more than their past actions.

moral flourishing is served, and by giving them the role of deterrent (as a consequence of their crime), their vocational flourishing as a citizen can be served—so long as the punishment fits the crime in a way that is fair, just, and ultimately compatible with their overall restoration.⁴⁵

When taking an approach that is oriented towards an accountee's flourishing, an accountee is not reduced to a ledger of past deeds but is judged and valued according to who they essentially are (a beloved child of God) and have the potential to become in light of or in spite of their past. In these respects, our view of accountability is primarily forward-looking in a way that makes it resistant to the notion that we can identify the value of a person with a quantification of their good and bad actions in a divine ledger.

To be clear, in looking forward with a focus on who a person is and can be, I am not suggesting that the interpretation of a person should block out their past. Clearly, an account of a person's past activity is indicative and predictive of certain aspects of who a person is and will be—a tree is known by its fruit. Moreover, if a person needs restoration, our account of that person will need to be informed by their past wrongdoing. Nonetheless, it is still better to come up with a definition of accountability that resists the human impulse to define persons according to a ledger of past actions, instead focusing on the potential of a person to grow and flourish in their relationship to their accountant(s). For this reason, we shall not equate a person's accountability *for who they are* with their accountability *for who they have been* or, indeed, their accountability *for how they acted*. To summarize, on our definition, an accountant's account of an accountee will also be based on who the accountee is and should be in relation to a shared project—one that is oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to an accountee.

This way of thinking about accountability is especially relevant when thinking about accountability in relation to God. God not only knows persons according to their past but also according to who they are and according to who God creates them to be within what we shall go on to frame as the Christological narrative—a narrative that, relative to the sinful life, is a narrative of redemption. According to the Christ-narrative, the story for which God creates the world is not derailed by sin but concludes as God intends, not with punishment and death, but with the triumph of grace and resurrection. It is Jesus Christ rather than sin that defines the human story—a point I shall develop in later chapters. It is in him that God identifies and upholds humanity for what it is, as the one in whom persons were created to be adopted before the foundation of the world. In making this point,

⁴⁵ The notion that taking on the vocation of a deterrent can serve one's vocational flourishing calls for more discussion than I am able to offer here. To make sure this point is not open to abuse, we would carefully need to explain what is required for a punishment to fit the crime in a way that is just, fair, and serves an accountee's overall restoration. For further discussion of this point, I defer to the excellent work of restorative justice scholars such as Byron Johnson, Sung Joon Jang, John Braithwaite, Chris Marshall, and Thomas Duncan-Noakes.

I am not suggesting that Couenhoven's position, as a whole, clashes with this Christological framing, and it is important to note that Couenhoven's focus is not on soteriological and Christological questions, but rather on what it means to be responsible for sin. Nonetheless, some of the specific ways in which Couenhoven frames accountability stand in stark contrast to how we are thinking about accountability.

4. Accountability and the Account of a Person

Having distinguished our view of accountability from two views of accountability that are not only respected but also representative, let us now say a bit more about why 'accountability' might be a good word for what we are discussing. One obvious distinction between 'accountability' and 'responsibility' is that 'accountability' is specifically concerned with an 'account' of a person. I say this not simply because 'account' is the etymological root of 'accountability', but also because of some of the key phrases with which 'accountability' is associated—'to give an account', 'to account for', or 'to be called to account'. Associating 'accountability' with the word 'account', however, raises a difficulty: it is often hard to know precisely what 'account' means in relation to accountability. In the above phrases, 'account' has something to do with self-justification, that is, with an explanation of oneself in relation to an accountant's account of who one should be. Thus:

To give an account (of oneself) or to account for (oneself): to provide a justificatory account of an aspect(s) of who one is and has been relative to an accountant's account of who one is and should be.

To be called to account (for oneself): to be called to provide a justificatory account of an aspect(s) of who one is and has been relative to an accountant's account of who one is and should be.

Each of these phrases is concerned with an account that seeks to justify an aspect of oneself in relation to an accountant's account of who one is and should be. It could perhaps also be a confessional account. When asked to account for one's moral failings, for example, a person could respond by giving an account of themselves as guilty. Yet they could just as easily respond by saying that they cannot account for their moral failing and so confess that they are guilty—which, again, suggests that 'account' refers to a justificatory explanation.

While the ability to try to offer a justificatory account of oneself is often critical to how we think about accountability, it is not a necessary condition for accountability. On the one hand, as I argue in Chapter 2, an accountee's explanatory account of themselves can, by generating greater transparency, help an accountant

to form a more accurate account of that accountee. On the other hand, it is possible for an accountant to form an account of an accountee without that accountee being able or willing to offer such an account. So, on the approach I am proposing, it is not an accountee's account of themselves that is most essential to accountability, but rather an accountant's account of the accountee relative to a shared project, insofar as that project is proper to the flourishing of the accountee. This is evident when thinking about another phrase relating to accountability:

To hold a person to account: to hold a person to an account of who an accountant thinks that person should be; or to hold a person to an account of who that person is or has been but should not be, according to an accountant.

It is possible for someone to be held to account without being able to grasp why it is they are being held to account—let alone being able to explain themselves relative to an accountant's account of who they should be. Moreover, there are times when holding someone to account can serve to help them grasp why it is they are being held to account. For example, it can be a part of a child's moral learning for a caregiver to hold a child to account *prior* to the child's grasping that they are wrong, why they are wrong, or, indeed, what it means for them to be wrong.⁴⁶ Under these circumstances, the caregiver will ideally give the child an account of an aspect of who they are or have been, based on their behaviour, and explain why this is not who they should be, relative to the caregiver's account of them. To offer a theological example, a person can be accountable to God, objectively speaking, even if they do not believe God exists and so cannot grasp (let alone explain) who they should be before God. Moreover, as the apostle Paul suggests, no person is yet able to grasp fully in the course of their lives who they are before God (1 Cor. 13:12). At the same time, this does not diminish a person's accountability to God with respect to their current life—for example, it does not mean they have any less of a duty to be sinless. It simply means that a person does not yet know in full who God has created them to be and thus does not have the opportunity to be all that God creates them to be.

To summarize, what is fundamental to our view is not an accountee's ability to offer an explanatory account of themselves but the accountant's ability to form such an account of them. An accountant must be able to form an account (A¹) of who the accountee is and has been, as well as an account (A²) of who the

⁴⁶ In using this example, I acknowledge that much contemporary work in psychology argues that moral judgement is a natural product of the evolution of our psychology. However, as Fiery Cushman, Victor Kumar, and Peter Railton point out, such research also acknowledges that learning plays a 'crucial role' in the development of moral judgement and behaviour. Fiery Cushman, Victor Kumar, and Peter Railton, 'Moral Learning: Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives', *Cognition* 167 (2017): pp. 1–10; quotation from p. 1.

accountee should be in relation to the accountant, so they can judge A^1 relative to A^2 . An accountant forms these accounts based on their narrative understanding of an accountee, which is in turn based on their larger narrative understanding of things. Accordingly, relative to a shared project, the accountee exists as a character in the narrative of the accountant, and the accountee becomes who they should be according to that narrative. To repeat the example we used in the introduction, in a relationship of accountability between a teacher and a student, the student exists as a character in the teacher's narrative of what it means to be a learner, and the teacher exists as a character in the student's narrative of what it means to be a teacher. Again, insofar as it is possible, both narratives should be informed by accountees communicating aspects of who they are to the accountors.

What, then, distinguishes the concepts of accountability and responsibility? In contrast to responsibility, accountability is specifically concerned with an accountant's account of who an accountee is and should be, relative to a shared project. Such a definition of accountability does not exclude this understanding of responsibility, and I should reiterate that there are various ways in which responsibility is a key part of a relationship of accountability—for example, the accountant and accountee are responsible to one another (insofar as they have obligations to one another), or the accountant and accountee are responsible for their actions relative to the project (insofar as each is the cause, agent, or source of their own actions). It is not our intention to sever 'accountability' from 'responsibility', and there will continue to be ways of using both words which entail significant semantic overlap between them. Our point, however, is that it is valid and appropriate to define 'accountability', as I have done, in a way that is markedly different from 'responsibility'. And if we appreciate 'accountability' as a distinct concept, it has the potential to play a distinctively valuable role in both our theological and more general vocabulary.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to establish a definition of accountability, give context to it, and distinguish it from some other ways of thinking about accountability, especially those that consider accountability as a synonym for a form of moral responsibility. The next chapter will offer a deeper analysis of this interpretation of accountability by examining four conditions or features that are characteristic of it.

2

Analysing Accountability

The aim of this chapter will be to offer a closer analysis of the concept of accountability as defined in Chapter 1. By so doing, it will limit the room for interpretation in a way that will help us to think more precisely and thereby more constructively about this concept. While accountability is a common word in contemporary theology, it is rarely used with precision and, as we have considered, tends to be used synonymously with various concepts of responsibility. By striving to pinpoint the distinctive meaning of this concept, this chapter will also enable us to contrast our use of this word with some of its looser applications.

While our overall focus is on accountability to God, this chapter will follow the approach of the previous chapter by trying to think more broadly about how our concept of accountability can be applied in a wider societal context. This will help us to avoid playing language games that are private to the world of academic theology. Nonetheless, as will be evident from the previous chapters, and will become increasingly evident over the course of this book, there are ways in which I shall engineer this concept to align it with specific theological commitments—for example, a commitment to recognizing a duty to love one's neighbour, or a commitment to avoid reducing an account of a person to one based purely on their past actions. The hope, however, is that our interpretation of this concept will also be applicable outside the theological domain, in wider society.

To begin, let us remind ourselves of the definition of accountability that we discussed in the previous chapter:

Accountability (between persons) is the condition of someone (the accountee) standing in relation to another (the accountant) who has an authority to judge relevant aspects of who the accountee is and should be relative to their role in a shared project; a project that characterizes the relationship between the accountant and the accountee and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to the accountee.

As we considered, one of the distinguishing features of accountability is the attention it gives to certain accounts of persons, accounts that should not simply be based on a record of a person's past actions, but on who a person is and should be relative to a shared project. What is the difference between a person and an account of a person, apart from the obvious fact that the latter is merely representative of the former? Within a relationship of accountability, an account of an

accountee is a meaningful interpretation of who an accountee is as a character within the narrative of an accountant, a narrative that, again, is oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to an accountee—although, as I also argued, if such an account is to be true to the person, it will resist reducing the person to a character in an accountant's narrative. An accountant must recognize there is always more to an accountee than an account of them can represent—unless, of course, the accountant is God.

To spell out this definition of accountability, we shall now focus on certain specific aspects of accountability and how they might be understood relative to particular contexts. By so doing, we shall gain a more precise understanding of how this term will be used in the rest of this book. More specifically, in line with our definition, this chapter will look closely at four conditions or features of accountability: (1) accountability requires a relationship in which the accountant has an authority to judge an aspect(s) of who the accountee is in relation to their shared project; (2) accountability requires an account or assessment of the accountee to be communicated and accurately interpreted by the accountant; (3) accountability is teleological; and (4) there is an order to relationships of accountability. In Chapter 3, we shall then consider the way in which (5) the condition of being accountable points to what we shall refer to as the virtue of accountability.

1. Accountability Requires a Relationship

Among the most basic requirements for the condition of accountability is a relationship.

Relationship of Accountability: an interpersonal relationship between an accountant and an accountee in which the accountant has authority to judge aspects of an accountee according to a shared project of who the accountee is (not) and/or what the accountee has (not) done, relative to their specific role in the project.

In a relationship of accountability, the role of an accountee is coupled with the role of an accountant. That is, a person is an accountee to the extent they are accountable to an accountant; and a person is an accountant insofar as they have a relationship of authority with respect to the accountee. And, again, the scope of this relationship is defined according to the limits of the shared project. For example, in a relationship between a teacher and a student, the student is accountable to the teacher for *learning* what the teacher can appropriately expect of them, if they are not to receive a poor grade. The teacher, therefore, is an accountant *qua* teacher, according to the shared project of learning. Yet, under certain circumstances, the teacher can also be accountable to the student for *teaching* what the student can reasonably expect of them, lest they receive a bad

teaching evaluation (so long as the student is capable of constructive judgement).¹ The student, therefore, is an accountant *qua* evaluator, according to the shared project of teaching. No one is an accountant or an accountee in an absolute sense, given that each role is contingent on the other. Not even God is absolutely an accountant since there is no accountability within the triune life of God.² God only becomes an accountant by creating persons who are accountable to God.

Within a relationship of accountability, the accountee is characterized by an obligation to live and act in a way that conforms to the accountant's account of who they should be in their specific role. Meanwhile, the accountant has an obligation to come up with an account of the accountee that is fitting and proper to their relationship, an account that will often need to be informed by the accountant being attentive to the particular life and situatedness of the accountee. To take a straightforward example: when it comes to teaching, it would not be fitting for a first-year teacher, Ms Jones, to expect her 5-year-old students to read *The Brothers Karamazov*, because such an expectation would not serve the goal of educating her students. Or when it comes to the task of evaluating a course, it would be unfitting for university students to expect their chemistry lecturer, Dr Smith, to teach them *The Brothers Karamazov*, because such an expectation would not line up with the task of teaching chemistry. As we discuss further below, under God, no non-divine person has absolute authority, and so no non-divine person can be an accountant in every walk of life. If an accountant goes beyond their proper remit(s), they will be misusing or abusing their authority; they will be assuming an authority they do not have relative to the shared project that characterizes the relationship of accountability.

There is an objection that could be made to the statement that accountability is essentially *relational*. Is it not possible for someone to be accountable to themselves? For example, a person might be said to hold himself accountable for failing to uphold his New Year's resolution to be a true Scotsman by not putting sugar on his porridge.³ Under such circumstances, however, it is not clear that accountability ceases to be relational. Rather, to use the language of Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus, such a person *functions* as a relational self 'that relates

¹ If the student does not have this capability, which is perhaps the case for most students prior to university, then I think it will be more accurate to describe the teacher as being accountable *for* the student in their relationship of accountability to parents, head teachers, external auditors, and so on.

² In making this point, I am rejecting the notion that there is eternal subordination or an eternal authority-submission relationship within the triune life of God, especially of the Son in relation to the Father. For an excellent collection of responses to such an approach, see Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower, *Trinity without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019).

³ See Antony Flew on the 'no true Scotsman fallacy' in his *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 104.

itself to itself'.⁴ That is, he self-consciously judges an account of himself as an untrue Scotsman (the self who put sugar on his porridge) in comparison to an account of himself as a true Scotsman (the self who would never do such a thing). So even when such a person holds himself accountable, there is still a kind of inward relationship taking place.

Another objection might be raised in response to the suggestion that accountability is *interpersonal*. That is, it is not uncommon for people to talk about being accountable to things that are not persons. For example, we sometimes talk about being accountable to institutions (construed non-personally),⁵ non-personal life forms,⁶ to our environment and the planet⁷ (sometimes framed as accountability to (non-existent) future generations),⁸ and to abstract ideas such as 'the truth' or 'the good'.⁹ The difficulty with thinking about non-personal things as accountors, in and of themselves, is that it is hard to know how they can (1) judge an accountee and (2) establish criteria for judging accountees (independent of persons associating these things with certain criteria). To try to be accountable to non-personal things, a person would need to imagine such things as possessing an agency with the ability to perform (1) and (2). Therefore, when someone says we

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13. A popular example of being accountable to oneself is evident in the bestselling book by David Goggins, *Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds* (Carson City, NV: Lioncrest, 2018), which recounts how Goggins turns his life around by being accountable to himself. Notably, however, a central part of his practice of accountability involves what he refers to as the accountability mirror (Goggins, *Can't Hurt Me*, p. 67). This is a mirror into which he looked to hold himself accountable. What is interesting about this is that it enhances the relational way in which he holds himself accountable. The idea of a mirror being used to hold oneself accountable is also embraced by Kierkegaard in his suggestion that we should treat God's Word as a mirror in which we can see ourselves. While Kierkegaard does not use the language of accountability, the key point he makes in his discussion is that we should judge ourselves according to an account of who God's Word reveals us to be. Søren Kierkegaard, 'What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?', in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 7–51. See also C. Stephen Evans's excellent discussion of this section in relation to accountability in *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), pp. 163–72.

⁵ e.g. John Uhr, 'Accountable Civil Servants', in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, ed. Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin, and Thomas Schillemans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 232; P. Cantillon, M. D'Eath, W. De Grave, and T. Dornan, 'How Do Clinicians Become Teachers? A Communities of Practice Perspective', *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 21 (2016): pp. 991–1008; on pp. 994–5.

⁶ e.g. Philipp Balzer, Klaus Peter Rippe, and Peter Schaber, 'Two Concepts of Dignity for Humans and Non-Human Organisms in the Context of Genetic Engineering', *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 13, nos. 1–2 (2000): pp. 7–27; on pp. 16–17.

⁷ e.g. Kim Q. Hall, 'No Failure: Climate Change, Radical Hope, and Queer Crip Feminist Eco-Futures', *Radical Philosophy Review* 17, no. 1 (2014): pp. 203–25; on p. 207.

⁸ e.g. Tim Mulgan, *Future People: A Moderate Consequentialist Account of our Obligations to Future Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ e.g. Lisa H. Newton, Louis Hodges, and Susan Keith, 'Accountability in the Professions: Accountability in Journalism', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19, nos. 3–4 (2004): pp. 166–90; on p. 170; Fabienne Peter, 'The Procedural Epistemic Value of Deliberation', *Synthese* 190 (2013): pp. 1253–66; on p. 1263.

are accountable to non-personal things, according to our interpretation, they do not really think we are accountable to such things in and of themselves. How, then, might we make sense of such a suggestion? Either they are suggesting that we are accountable *for* non-personal things in our accountability *to* a person who can perform (1) and (2) in relation to non-persons (e.g. when someone says we are accountable to the planet, they really mean that we are accountable *for* the planet in our accountability *to* a person(s) who establishes criteria for how we should live and act towards the planet), or they might be personifying the non-personal things (e.g. when someone says that we are accountable to ‘the truth’ or ‘the good’, they may just be treating these abstract ideas as though they were embodied as personal agents).

Now it could rightly be argued that institutions can be considered as personal social groups with a distinct ability to perform (1) and (2).¹⁰ If this is the case, it is because the institution is made up of a group of persons performing (1) and (2) together as a collective—historically (as a group that includes past members) and/or contemporarily (as a group that includes present members). To say that an accountee is accountable to a social institution is to say that an accountee is accountable to a group of persons who cooperate to make judgements about aspects of an accountee according to their participation in the institution. Practically speaking, when a person is held accountable by an institution, they are held to account by a person(s) who is not simply an accountor in and of themselves but a representative of the collective that defines the institution. Within such an institution, there may be a certain hierarchy in which the judgements of lower members are accountable to higher members in the hierarchy—ideally, with some reciprocity between the lower and higher members. However, the group can also be democratic, meaning that the authority of persons within the collective will be equal when it comes making judgements and establishing criteria for the social institution. Under these circumstances, when a person is accountable to a social institution, they are accountable to persons whose judgements are informed by and align with the majority judgement of the collective. In these instances, institutions function as accountors insofar as they are constituted by persons performing (1) and (2) collectively. So, the possibility of group accountability does not constitute a counterexample to the assertion that accountability is grounded in interpersonal relationships.

While it may not make sense to say that a person can be accountable to non-personal things, one could fairly argue there are valuable rhetorical reasons for talking about being accountable to non-personal things. For example, the

¹⁰ See Christian List and Phillip Pettit, *Group Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stephanie Collins, *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Joshua Cockayne, ‘Analytic Ecclesiology: The Social Ontology of the Church’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (2019): pp. 100–23.

suggestion that ‘we are accountable to the planet’ can have different connotations than saying ‘we are accountable to human beings for the planet’. The former may be more likely to express a need to be attentive to the observable nature of the planet itself before jumping too quickly to focus on a more anthropocentric interpretation of it. Something similar can be said about abstract objects. The suggestion that we are ‘accountable to the truth’ or ‘accountable to the good’ may encourage us to think more carefully about the objective nature of ‘the truth’ and ‘the good’ (if such objectivity is to be recognized) before embracing whatever human construction of ‘the truth’ or ‘the good’ might be in vogue or best serve one’s immediate purposes. However, while there may be rhetorical value in suggesting we can be accountable to non-personal things, we shall maintain that an accountant must be a person(s) who can come up with a meaningful account of who an accountee should be in relation to them—something a non-personal entity cannot do.

Another point to add here is that the interpersonal character of accountability is reinforced when we recognize that a personal God exists and is the ground of all value and meaning. It is a premise of this book, as a work of theology, that all humans are accountable to God for how they exist. This premise, however, raises a question: if all humans are ultimately accountable to God, does it make sense to say that persons can be accountable *to* non-divine persons rather than simply being accountable to God *for* non-divine persons? This can make sense, albeit derivatively, if we recognize that God gives human persons authoritative roles to play in creation. One of the ways in which God helps persons to grow and flourish in this world is by calling some persons to serve as accountors; for example, God calls persons to be doctors, teachers, and pastors. Such accountors have an authority to judge others according to criteria they play a role in establishing. When they do so, however, they must seek to establish their criteria in a way that is informed by their understanding of God’s criteria, insofar as this is possible. Persons are empowered to be accountors only if their authority is compatible with God’s purposes for creation. In this respect, as I argue below, we are accountable to God for how we hold others accountable. Yet, insofar as humans can play a constructive role in holding persons accountable, it is still valid to consider humans as accountors.

Before moving on to the next section, there is one last question to address in this section: can we be accountable to persons who have cognitive limitations that prevent them from being able to judge accountees and establish criteria for judging accountees? For example, can a parent be accountable to, rather than simply accountable for, an infant or a child with severe cognitive disabilities or limitations?¹¹ According to the concept of accountability under consideration,

¹¹ In making this point, we can acknowledge that there may be subtle ways in which an infant or a child with severe cognitive disabilities or limitations can express disapproval for how they are being treated (e.g. by crying or wincing) in a way that serves to judge who someone (e.g. a caregiver) is and should be (e.g. someone who should not cause pain). Nonetheless, in so doing, it will be up to the

they cannot be. As will become clear, this answer does not in any way diminish the value and worth of such persons. When a human plays the role of accountant, they simply take on a specific role that certain people have in this world; it does not mean they somehow have greater value or worth. Understood theologically, the relationship of accountability is always a relationship of love that, between humans, is essentially a relationship between persons who are equal in dignity and value. Moreover, as is revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, to be a human accountant is to be a servant to an accountee; it is to be committed to (and therefore capable of) establishing criteria and making judgements that serve the flourishing of those to whom one is accountable.

2. Accountability Requires Communication and Interpretation

As the combination of its constituent words suggests, accountability requires an accountee to be ‘able’ to give an ‘account’ of themselves.¹² This is evident, for example, when we consider the following phrases concerning accountability.

To hold to account/to hold accountable. This either involves an accountant holding an accountee to an account of who they should be—a teacher, for example, might hold a child to an account of a good student (in which ‘holding to’ means ‘expect to conform to’)—or it involves an accountant holding an accountee to an account of who they have been but should not have been. A teacher, for example, might hold a student accountable for being a cheat. When they do so, the student is judged negatively for embodying the role of a cheat, ideally with a view to thinking about how to deliver the student from their disposition to cheat.

To give an account of oneself/to account for oneself. This involves an accountee communicating an account of themselves relative to the accountant’s account of who they should be. For example, if a student thinks they have fallen short of being a good student, they will give an account of who they are as someone who has fallen short, which may or may not justify their actions.

In these two examples, for an accountant to judge an accountee, an account of the accountee needs to be communicated to the accountant. This does not

person who encounters such a reaction to interpret it in a way that leads them to make their own judgement of who the child is and should be. I am grateful to Jared Michelson for pushing me on this point.

¹² As Adam Smith puts it: ‘An accountable being, as the word expresses, is a being that must give an account of its actions to some other, and that consequently must regulate them according to the good-looking of this other.’ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 130 n. 2.

necessarily mean, however, that an accountee must be ready, able, and/or willing to communicate an account of themselves verbally. It is possible for such an account to be given non-verbally, because accountees are always embodying, and thereby communicating, accounts of themselves, albeit in a way that requires accurate interpretation by the accountant. This is especially the case when it comes to accountability to God. Consider, for example, one of the most directly relevant verses in Scripture for thinking about accountability to God, Hebrews 4:12–13: ‘the word of God is living and active... [and] able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.’ In these verses on accountability to God, the emphasis is not placed on creatures to give a verbal account of themselves to God, but on God discerning and judging the thoughts and intentions of creatures based on God’s all-seeing eyes.¹³

It will be helpful, in light of this, to explore briefly the place of communication and interpretation in relationships of accountability. Consequently, we shall now consider first what it means to embody an account of oneself, and then, second, what is involved in interpreting such an account.

2.1 Embodying an account of oneself

Humans live an embodied existence, which means they embody a true account of who they are—a point which is so obvious it may seem trivial. That said, when one is asked to give an account of oneself, there is normally an expectation that one will provide a verbal account of what one is accountable for doing, rather than simply letting one’s non-verbal embodiment do the talking. So, for example, in a relationship between a mother and her young toddler, it might seem unfair for a mother to ask her toddler to give an account of himself when he is unable to explain his actions verbally. This could also be the case in a relationship of accountability in which disability prevents one participant in a relationship from being able to articulate an account of their actions verbally.

On this view, an inability to give a verbal account of what they are accountable for doing does not prevent a person from being accountable. It only precludes a person from being accountable for articulating themselves verbally, insofar as it is not fitting for an accountant to hold a person accountable for something they cannot be expected to deliver. Nonetheless, it is still possible to hold a non-verbal communicator accountable. A mother can hold her toddler accountable for hitting his friend, even if her toddler is unable to talk properly. If the mother

¹³ One could suggest that to ‘render an account’ (Heb. 4:13) implies we ought to provide a verbal explanation of ourselves to God, but it is equally straightforward to read these words as affirming our ultimate accountability to God.

responds by reprimanding him, her action will be based on an account of her toddler that has been communicated non-verbally. That said, if the toddler was older and could articulate himself verbally, then it would be appropriate to ask him to give a verbal account of himself. In so doing, the mother would be asking for a fuller account than is communicable through non-verbal forms of communication; she would be seeking greater transparency. Such an account may well help her to be a better judge of her child—so long as her child gives an honest account of himself. This is because, while accountability is possible without verbal communication, it is also the case that verbal communication can be invaluable. From a merely human perspective, non-verbal communication can only provide very limited insight into a person, which is why we need to be careful about judging books by their covers.

At the same time, however, verbal accounts can often be more misleading than accounts based on non-verbal communication. Intentionally or unintentionally, persons frequently misrepresent, misinterpret, or even completely fabricate verbal accounts of themselves. So it can be important for an accountant to compare an accountee's verbal account of themselves to an account based on non-verbal communication. This is evident, for example, when an accountant needs to judge an accountee for a crime they falsely deny committing. It may be that an accurate account of a suspect will need to be discerned by looking at their non-verbal communication, such as via video footage, DNA evidence, eyewitness accounts, and so on. While there can be good reasons to avoid judging a book by its cover, it is also the case (to mix metaphors) that if something walks, quacks, and looks like a duck, it probably is a duck—even if the duck quacks that it is not a duck.

When there is a clash between a non-verbal account of a person and one based on their own verbal account, it is often because an accountee is intentionally misrepresenting themselves. Yet even when an accountee is trying to be honest, there can still be other hurdles that undermine the accuracy of their verbal accounting. Again, accountability can be undermined by unintentional misinterpretation on the part of the accountee, the accountant, or both of them. It is therefore crucial to give attention to the role that interpretation plays in relationships of accountability, and to the narrative self-understandings that are subliminally operative in human thinking.

2.2 Accountability involves interpretation

From within the limits of a finite human perspective, it can be very difficult to judge whether there is any misinterpretation of who an accountee is and should be: whether an accountee is misinterpreting themselves, and/or whether the accountant is guilty of misinterpretation. This is because there are often a variety of competing ways to interpret a person and, sometimes, several different

interpretations can appear to be valid. The problem here is that if an accountant misinterprets an accountee, they will fail to judge them accurately and fairly, and thus in a way that will serve the flourishing of the accountee. To appreciate this point, it will be helpful to consider a few examples in which interpretation can make a critical difference to the judgement that goes on within relationships of accountability.

1. How we interpret the relationship between a person's psychology (beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) and their physicality can impact how an accountant judges what an accountee has the freedom to do and can be expected to do. At one extreme, there are physicalists who believe there is no need to connect these things because a person's psychology just is (reducible to) their physicality, meaning that psychological causes, states, and events are reducible to physical causes, states, and events. On such a view, it is difficult to maintain human autonomy. At the other extreme, there are dualists who believe that a person's psychology (and autonomy) is detached from their physicality. While it *may* be easier for such a position to maintain human autonomy, it might also be harder for them to make sense of the close connections that appear between the non-physical mind and the physical brain. As a result, such a position can underestimate a person's psychological limitations and overestimate their mental fortitude. There is also a wide range of other positions (including more moderate dualist and physicalist positions) between these two extremes. The relevant point here is that the position one takes in this debate has implications for how we interpret an accountee's autonomy and responsibility.¹⁴ This, in turn, impacts whether an accountant should judge an accountee for being able to act otherwise and, if so, to what extent they could have done so.
2. In various times and places, different interpretations of a person's race, sex, gender, and/or sexual orientation have shaped how we interpret an accountee and, on that basis, make judgements about what they should be expected to do.
3. In the criminal justice system, how we interpret cognitive development shapes our interpretation of whether an accountee should be considered as a 'juvenile' or 'mentally incompetent'. This impacts how an accountee is judged and whether they are judged according to the full extent of the law.
4. Related to this, when it comes to distinguishing between murder and manslaughter, different interpretations of the connection between a person's mental state and their responsibility can influence whether an action is deemed malicious. This constitutes a more specific example of how beliefs

¹⁴ See Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

about an accountee's blameworthiness can be impacted by beliefs about the nature and extent of human autonomy (and whether it has been compromised by a person's mental state).

5. When it comes to interpreting how best to educate and evaluate a child, it matters whether a psychiatrist interprets a child as having a condition that impacts their abilities and performance (such as autism, dyslexia, or ADHD). This interpretation will be based on how we interpret the symptoms of a specific condition. It will then also matter how a teacher interprets a child with this condition, and whether they believe that that child should receive special treatment. This interpretation will be based on a teacher's interpretation of the connection between a specific condition and its impact on a child's abilities, albeit an interpretation that will hopefully be informed by a psychiatrist's diagnosis.

These are just a handful of concrete examples of how (mis)interpretation can impact the judgement that takes place within a relationship of accountability. But let us now try to think more generally about how (mis)interpretation impacts an accountant's judgement of an accountee.

In a relationship of accountability, there will be many ways in which an accountant has authority to make judgements about certain aspects of who an accountee is and should be. For example, a teacher might judge whether a child is a good student, whether they should be able to perform better, and, if so, how they can perform better. However, unless the accountant is God, there are limits to the authority of an accountant. Non-divine accountants do not have free rein to judge accountees in whatever way they choose, based on their own subjective judgement. If an accountant is going to serve the flourishing of an accountee, they must judge them according to an objective framework of value and meaning that defines what it truly means for them to flourish. The relevant point to bear in mind here is that an accountant's authority is delimited by God and, secondarily, by any other person (which could include the accountee themselves) who plays an authoritative role in defining aspects of who the accountee is and should be. Therefore, non-divine accountants have an obligation to try to interpret accountees according to the judgement of higher accountants who also play an authoritative role in communicating—or, in God's case, determining—the objective framework of value and meaning. Non-divine accountants are always accountable to at least one other accountant, namely, God in God's role as an accountant.

To put this in context, let us return to our earlier examples. If our teacher, Ms Jones, interprets her 5-year-old students as being ready to read Dostoevsky, it is safe to assume this would involve a misinterpretation of her students' abilities. Consequently, if she were to judge the students negatively in their reports, based on their failure to succeed in this task, she would be misusing her authority; she does not have the authority to judge her students for failing to perform a task that

is far beyond their abilities. If she remains adamant that it is within her authority to interpret children in this way, she could be held accountable by a higher authority, such as the headteacher or the Parent-Teacher Association—that is, by any authority which legitimately plays a higher role in deciding what is appropriate for the students. Or, to consider our other example, if students (*qua* evaluators) expected their chemistry lecturer, Dr Smith, to teach them Russian literature, this would be due to a misinterpretation of Dr Smith's role. Such students, therefore, do not have the authority to judge Dr Smith negatively for not teaching them in this area; they do not have the authority to judge her for failing to perform a task that is not a part of her remit. If the students put forward a formal complaint about this perceived failure, the students could be judged as confused by the relevant authorities within the university who legitimately play a higher role in determining what can justifiably be expected of a chemistry lecturer.

These two examples are reasonably straightforward and thus illustrate the point transparently. More often than not, however, interpreting persons is far more complicated and subject to error. For this reason, we cannot expect Ms Jones or Dr Smith to interpret their students with total accuracy in a way that enables them to know how best to teach their particular class. This task becomes all the more challenging when faced with interpreting and teaching a diverse group of children (as a collective), with each child having particular abilities and expectations. Whereas some students might find their teaching tedious and simplistic, other students might find it exciting but challenging. When it comes to human relationships of accountability, neither party can ever be expected to interpret the other side perfectly. So, just as a primary school teacher should not expect a 5-year-old to be able to read Dostoevsky, we cannot expect accountors to be flawless interpreters of accountees. In short, when thinking about human relationships of accountability, we must be cognizant of the limits of human interpretation.

While human interpretation may be imperfect, this does not mean misinterpretation is always justifiable. Giving time and effort to accurate interpretation remains essential to human relationships of accountability. Naturally, this raises practical questions about how much time and attention an accountor should give to interpreting an accountee before making judgements—but such questions are beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say, however, if Ms Jones spends several months trying to interpret a particular group of students before judging them, she is likely to fail in other ways in her role as a teacher. Clearly, therefore, she will need to strive to find the right balance between working out how much time to devote to interpreting her students, and how much time to spend judging them.

To conclude this section, it has hopefully become clear that careful reflection is important when forming an account of an accountee. This point may seem quite obvious. Yet, when we consider how assessment generally takes place in relationships of accountability, it is clear that accountors will often, perhaps

understandably, disregard the importance of interpretation and rush to make judgements about accountees without adequately understanding them. As a result, accountors can often end up making judgements that undermine the flourishing of accountees—or, at the very least, fail to serve their flourishing as effectively as they could and should do. When this happens, the accountant may be overestimating their authority when it comes to judging accountees. Yet, while accountors can often be too quick to make judgements about accountees, it is also the case that the problem of misinterpretation has not gone unnoticed. This is evident from the many books on bestsellers lists that have been written to help us become better interpreters of other people and thereby better accountors—books by such authors as Jonathan Haidt and Malcolm Gladwell.¹⁵ These reflect an increasing investment in the psychological and social sciences, which is a positive sign that we are taking the task of interpretation more seriously when it comes to judging other humans. There are, however, limitations to what psychology and the social sciences can tell us. While they can certainly help us to negotiate the psychological and social dimensions of this world, they cannot, in and of themselves, tell us about the ultimate framework of value and meaning for which humans have been created. And if we are to become better accountors, we not only need to develop a better understanding of accountees based on empirical scientific observations, we also need to understand better who accountees are before the God who ultimately defines the objective ends for humans. That is, we also need to think carefully about the overarching teleology that is in play. This will be given a more focused consideration in our theological discussion in Part II. For now, however, let us continue to think more generally about the nature of accountability by turning to consider its teleological nature.

3. Accountability Is Teleological

When a person falls short of meeting a certain end, it can often be due to moral vices such as pride, sloth, jealousy, greed, or lust. Indeed, when we say that a person should be held accountable for a failure, there is very often an implicit suggestion they are guilty of a moral failure and so should be punished. Yet, as we shall consider in this section, an accountee can fall short in their role in a relationship of accountability without being morally culpable. It may be the case, for example, that an accountee has not yet acquired a particular ability requisite for achieving their end(s). When this happens, an accountor can still hold an accountee to an account of who they should be, yet without moral

¹⁵ e.g., Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

judgement. As such, I contend it is better to think about accountability in broader teleological terms, rather than being narrowly focused on an accountee's moral obligations. To gain a better understanding of the teleological nature of accountability, this section will consider this aspect of accountability by using as examples, first, a full back's relationship to their coach, and then, second, a teacher's relationship to a range of students.

In order to build a strong rugby team, a coach will need to have an account of the role of the full back, which should inform and direct their judgement of a particular full back, whom we shall call Morag. Integral to the coach's account, for example, might be an expectation that a full back can run 100 metres in under thirteen seconds. Fulfilling this expectation would therefore be a goal for Morag. If Morag falls short of this pace during practice, the coach can hold her to account for this failure such that she is now given the goal of achieving this pace in accordance with the coach's account of who she should be. In response to the coach holding her accountable, Morag could give an account of herself indicating that she had been lazy, thus revealing that she is deserving of moral judgement—although such judgement may not be a part of the coach's role. However, she might also give an account of herself that shows she is not morally culpable for her shortcoming—perhaps she has been working hard on other aspects of her performance to the detriment of her speed. Either way, if, in response to Morag's account of herself, the coach continues to hold her to an account of a full back who can run 100 metres in under thirteen seconds, she will have an obligation to reorient herself towards achieving that goal.

There is, however, another way in which the coach can respond to Morag's slower pace: that is, by adapting his expectations. If an accountee exceeds or falls short of an accountant's expectations, it may be that an accountant decides to develop a different account of a particular accountee's role. For example, whereas a rugby coach might once have expected Morag to embody an account of an A-team full back, if she falls short of the coach's expectations (perhaps because they cannot achieve a certain pace), the coach may decide to demote Morag to the B-team, in which the coach now expects her to embody an account of a B-team player. In this example, when a coach decides whether a player should be judged relative to an account of an A-team player or a B-team player, the coach asks themselves what account is most fitting for that player.

There is a direct connection here between a person's fittingness and an accountant's account of the accountee. On the one hand, if the accountant's account is going to serve the flourishing of an accountee, it must be formidable enough to be able to encourage an accountee towards ends that support or advance their flourishing. On the other hand, it must not be so demanding that it generates despair and anxiety, in a way that discourages the flourishing of an accountee. To think further about the teleological nature of accountability in relation to the question of fittingness, let us return to the example of the teacher–student

relationship and consider both whether and how our teacher, Ms Jones, should hold three different students accountable for being unable to answer the question 'What does 5×5 equal?' In each of these scenarios, the fittingness of the child makes a difference to whether their ability to answer this question should be a part of the account that Ms Jones has of them.

The first student is a 5-year-old who is unable to answer the above sum correctly. In this scenario, Ms Jones can fairly assume that this is due to the reasonable limitations that characterize her account of an average 5-year-old.¹⁶ Insofar as an accountant's account must be fitting for an accountee, the 5-year-old need not be judged to have fallen short in her role.

The second student is a capable 10-year-old who is unable to answer the question correctly because he has been lazy rather than studious during his time at school. In this instance, it is reasonable for Ms Jones to judge this student relative to an account of a more diligent student who can learn how to answer this question. This does not necessarily mean that it is a part of Ms Jones's role to offer a moral judgement. However, even if it is not, since the student's shortcoming was due to a moral failure that could have been avoided, it is fair for Ms Jones to judge him according to an account of a student who should have been able to answer this question.

The third student is a 10-year-old child who has grown up in an abusive home. Let us call him Charlie. Had Charlie not been subject to abuse, he would have been able to learn how to answer this question correctly. However, psychological trauma has prevented him from learning the required arithmetic. In this example, Ms Jones should not judge Charlie as morally culpable, because unlike the second student, his failure is not due to a moral shortcoming—if, that is, we interpret his failure as a consequence of his abuse.¹⁷ Nonetheless, there may still be reasons why Ms Jones might decide to hold him accountable for this failure—that is, why she might judge him relative to the account of a child who can learn how to answer the question. For example, she might judge him to be 'behind' his age group such that her account of an average child in his age group continues to inform her account of who he is and should be. In making this judgement, she holds him accountable intellectually, but not morally; she judges him relative to an intellectual account of an average 10-year-old. To avoid any misunderstanding at this point, let us think further about Charlie's situation.

¹⁶ By 'average', this could mean the child's intellectual abilities fit within a range based on a national assessment of what a 5-year-old child should be expected to know.

¹⁷ It is of course possible that Charlie's experience of abuse led him to become lazy (or develop some other moral shortcoming), which in turn led to his failure as a student. Indeed, it is highly likely that something like this would have happened. Under these circumstances, there would be a sense in which he was morally blameworthy for his failure to answer the question correctly, even if he is not morally blameworthy for the moral decline that led him to become lazy. What this point suggests is that, practically speaking, circumstances such as Charlie's are likely to be much more complicated than I am reflecting here. I am grateful to Jonathan Rutledge for encouraging me to clarify this.

In objection to our third example, one could argue it is unfair to hold Charlie accountable for failures that are due to his psychological trauma. Accordingly, one may contend that the third example is comparable to the first example; just as it is not fitting to hold a 5-year-old accountable for being unable to answer the question, so also it is not fitting to hold Charlie accountable for his failure. Ms Jones's account would therefore be too high if she were to judge either of them relative to an account of a child who should know how to answer this question.

In view of objections such as this, we need to be clear about what precisely it means for Ms Jones to hold Charlie accountable in this situation. The first incontrovertible point to make here is that Ms Jones should not hold Charlie accountable for his psychological trauma and the ways in which this impedes him.¹⁸ It would be unfitting to judge Charlie relative to an account of someone who is impervious to psychological abuse. This would be inappropriate, not only because no human should be expected to have this kind of resilience, but also because such judgement is not a part of her role as a teacher. So, in this respect, Ms Jones should not hold Charlie accountable for veering away from the intellectual trajectory of an average 10-year-old.

The second point to clarify is that there are circumstances in which these first and third examples are more comparable. This would be the case if, for example, the abuse had been so damaging it would no longer be fitting for Ms Jones to judge Charlie's intellectual abilities relative to those of his age group. Under these circumstances, it may be best for Charlie to be held back a year so he can be judged relative to the account of an average child in a younger age group.

If, however, the trauma had not been this damaging, there could well be good social reasons to try to restore him to the abilities of his age group: for example, his friends of the same age might provide strong emotional support such that removing him from his social group would create further instability, which could negatively impact his education. When children fall behind intellectually, for whatever reason, the first port of call is not normally to start judging them relative to a lower age group; instead, there is usually an attempt to help them catch up. Charlie's situation, therefore, is distinguishable from that of the 5-year-old because, while the group of average 10-year-olds might not be a good fit for him intellectually, this group is still a good fit for him socially. So, based on a social account of Charlie, it may be reasonable for Ms Jones to work with Charlie so that he can catch up intellectually to where he is socially—and this will require her to hold him intellectually to an account of an average 10-year-old. By so doing, she does not allow her account of Charlie as an abuse victim to cancel out her account of him as a student who should be able to perform at the intellectual level of an average 10-year-old. Instead, she recognizes that restoration can be a part of what

¹⁸ Of course, the same might be said for possible underlying causes of the second student's laziness.

it means for her to hold Charlie accountable. While it may be unreasonable for her to expect Charlie to catch up by means of his own resources, such higher expectations can be reasonable within the context of her relationship with him. This is because in a relationship of accountability, an accountant can make it possible for an accountee's otherwise unachievable potential to be reached. Importantly, therefore, while a certain account may be unfitting for a person outside of a particular relationship of accountability, it may well be fitting within it.

In summary, in a relationship of accountability, an accountant's account of an accountee should be informed by a multifaceted consideration of an accountee's various ends (including their physical, moral, social, and intellectual ends) and their fittingness for certain ends (e.g. whether a child should be judged according to the intellectual ends of an average 10-year-old). However, an accountant's account need not only be based on an accountee's immediate abilities. Accountants can also bear in mind the potential of accountees to acquire new abilities within a relationship of accountability. This point is particularly relevant for thinking about accountability to God. As Jesus suggests in Mark 10:23–7, there are some things that cannot be expected from human beings, in and of themselves, but which can be expected with help from God. Accordingly, God not only holds persons accountable for what they are immediately able to do, but also according to what is possible for them in relationship with God. This is why human beings can be both enslaved to sin and yet also accountable for sin. While it may not be possible for human beings to become sinless in and of themselves, this does not mean God cannot expect human perfection on the basis that, by the grace of God, perfection is a possibility. Theologically speaking, 'ought' does not imply 'can, in and of oneself'; 'ought' implies 'can, in and through an empowering relationship with God'.¹⁹

Now, as we discussed in the previous section, coming up with a well-balanced and charitable account of an accountee can be extremely difficult, given the challenge of interpretation. One way to improve the interpretation of an accountee, as is evident from our discussion of Charlie, is to learn about an accountee's developmental history. With insight into an accountee's backstory, an accountant can be a far better judge of the accountee going forward. If, however, such insight is to be helpful, the past events in the accountee's life will need to be interpreted within a narrative framework that enables the accountant to make judgements about how such events will impact the accountee's role and flourishing in a shared project.

¹⁹ Eleonore Stump also makes this point when she writes, 'On Aquinas's optimistic view of human life, however, there is a principle which is similar to the false principle that ought implies can and which is not false but true: ought implies can-with-help . . . the help in question on Aquinas's view is God's aid to the will enabling it to accept God's love and grace'. Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 212.

This raises a further question: which narrative should an accountant adopt to understand an accountee's flourishing? If we ask the accountee to offer a meaningful interpretation of their own life story, we could get quite a different interpretation than if we were to ask someone else. Indeed, depending on who the two narrators are, we could end up with two competing stories which present the accountee as two very different characters. For example, according to one narrative, an accountee might be a victim of abuse and, according to another, the accountee might be a protégé whose abilities were enhanced by a rigorous upbringing. If either or both of these stories are false, then the storytelling can end up doing more harm than good to an accountant's attempt to form an adequate account of an accountee.

When faced with competing stories, the accountant stands to benefit enormously from knowing at least one basic or overarching story that is true for the accountee, which can guide their interpretation of an accountee. As this book considers, theology provides us with such a story: a story of who a person is according to the one ultimate storyteller, God. The limited and fragmented insight we have into this story (e.g. through Scripture) will not make an accountant's interpretation of an accountee straightforward—for example, it may well be unable to help an accountant distinguish between abuse or rigorous upbringing. Nonetheless, it does provide accountants with substantial guidance for interpreting the flourishing of accountees. The reason this story is so fundamental, as we shall now consider, is that its author, God, is the ultimate accountant, and it is according to God's authority that we should seek to organize and prioritize the various accounts that different accountants have of who accountees should be.

4. There Is an Order to Relationships of Accountability

In society, most people find themselves accountable to a variety of persons, each of whom have different accounts of who they should be. These accounts can be complementary—for example, a physiotherapist's account of an accountee will hopefully complement one from an accountee's athletic coach. They can be competitive—while a person can be both a musician and an athlete, a person's music teacher and athletic coach may have competing accounts, for the simple reason that persons need to prioritize their time if they are to excel in a specific task. And such accounts can stand in direct conflict—different religious or areligious leaders will often operate with conflicting accounts. Since no one can ever be more than one person, it helps to have a way to balance out, prioritize, and, at times, reject the various accounts different accountants have of who one should be. That is, it is helpful to propose an order according to which we can organize the various relationships of accountability in which we participate.

Order of accountability: the order of accountors, at the top of which is the accountor to whom one is most accountable, and at the bottom the accountor to whom one is least accountable.

How might we order relationships of accountability? In line with the focus of this book, I shall contend that God is at the top of the order of accountability. I shall then propose, albeit with trepidation, that God is followed by group leaders, caregivers, and then by the individual subjects themselves. While it would be easy to spend the rest of this book debating and nuancing this order, for our specific purposes, I shall merely propose a general account of how we might think about the roles these figures play within the structures of creation under God.

1. *God* is the ultimate or absolute accountor who determines every other authority. To cite the apostle Paul, 'there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God' (Rom. 13:1; see also Rom. 14:6–12). As the purposeful Creator, God holds the truest account of every human. According to God's creative purposes, God knows each person better than they can know themselves, which is why Proverbs 3:5 (and similar verses) goes so far as to say: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.' For this reason, it is ultimately in relation to God that we should come to understand the order of accountability. God's authority is communicated to creation first and foremost through the person of Jesus Christ, to whom 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given' (Matt. 28:18). This communication is made known by means of the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, who sets our minds and hearts on God. The power of such communication, however, is not overwhelming, but allows humans a certain space to interpret for themselves who they should be before God. This space allows humans to emerge in their own unique ways and develop their own particular identities and cultures. While this is a good feature of creation, it also opens the door for humans to become confused about their place in the world before God. That is, it makes it easy to misinterpret God's authority as the accountor over all. Therefore, humans continually need to turn to Scripture to learn about who they are. Furthermore, to increase the likelihood of accurate interpretation, they must do so as an ecclesial community of interpreters, who contemplate Scripture and the theological tradition together, in the context of prayerful faith, hope, and trust that God is guiding them.

2. Under God, I propose that the next highest accountors are *group leaders*: leaders who are representatives of a group. Generally, these are individuals or collectives who govern groups such as societies at large or smaller institutions, including the church. Ideally, these leaders should be appointed by the group to serve as representatives who can govern the group in a way that serves their flourishing. While God is the ultimate authority, God allows groups and their leaders room to make their own decisions about how to function. With the relative

autonomy granted them, group leaders can make decisions (informed by the group) about what it means to be a member of that group—to be a member who abides by its laws and regulations and contributes to its flourishing. Such decisions will include decisions (again, informed by the group) about the order of the group—about who will have more or less authority within these groups.

It is of course possible for group leaders to abuse their positions of authority. They can seek to impose an account of what it means to be a group member that clashes with God's account of what it means to be human, and which consequently undermines the flourishing of the group—for example, if group leaders come up with an account informed by Nazi ideology. When this happens, God's account should take priority, albeit with group members showing extreme caution to choose to prioritize *their own interpretation* of God's account over against the account of group leaders. How should Christian members of society prioritize God's authority over group leaders when the two clash? As Romans 12–13 can be interpreted as saying, with reference to Roman society, they should not rise up and rebel violently against the group. Rather, the church is called to witness faithfully and assuredly to God's authority in peaceful ways that can, by the grace of God, inspire the direction of a group. This may well mean that the church calls into question a group leader's office as an accountant, such that members of the church no longer regard that leader as having legitimate authority under God.

3. Under God and within society, there are persons to whom I shall refer broadly as *caregivers*. These persons can be family members, teachers, doctors, pastors, friends, and so on. The highest role a caregiver can play is communicating (when relevant) what it means, first, to belong to God and, second, to belong to the group of which they are members. In this capacity, caregivers serve as interpreters of who an accountee should be within the social order of creation. For example, a parent, pastor, or a teacher might, first, have an account of a child as a Roman Catholic or a Protestant and, second, as conservative or progressive. Of course, a parent, pastor, or teacher should also have an account of a child as someone who should seek to develop their own account of who they should be as a child of God and a member of the groups in which they find themselves.

As well as offering an account of what it means to correspond to God's creative purposes and/or contribute to society, caregivers can also make judgements about what projects an accountee should take up, such as learning, exercise, medical treatment, socializing, chores, and so on. A caregiver should make these judgements when they are justified in thinking they can make better judgements about what is best for an accountee than an accountee can make for themselves. This role of the caregiver is especially important in relationships with accountees who have a more limited ability to make good judgements for themselves, such as very young persons or persons with cognitive disabilities. This role, however, will

become less dominant if and when a person develops better judgement about who they want to become in a way that serves their flourishing. By this stage, however, the caregivers will already have been foundational in determining the role(s) an accountee chooses to adopt. This brings us to the final figure who plays a role in the order of accountability: the individual subject themselves.

4. By making decisions for themselves about who they seek to become, and which projects they seek to pursue, each person plays a role in determining the relationships of accountability in which they participate and, therefore, who should be accountors in their lives. For example, if a person decides to become a musician, they might decide a music teacher has a higher authority over them than an athletics coach. Of course, by the time they come to make such a decision, they will have already been shaped dramatically (directly or indirectly) by the judgements of God, group leaders, and caregivers. Nonetheless, as they develop, each person will come to have a greater impact on their relationships of accountability to groups and caregivers, if they are able to do so.

While it may be both a part of God's creative purposes and an observable feature of the world that there is an order of accountability, it is extremely important to reiterate this does not mean that, under God, such an order should be strictly authoritarian or paternalistic. As mentioned in Chapter 1, under God, interhuman relationships of accountability should be characterized by reciprocity, insofar as they can be, to help ensure that accountors are genuinely serving the flourishing of accountees. This means that accountees have an essential role to play in informing and shaping the judgements of accountors to help ensure that accountors are genuinely serving the flourishing of accountees. So, for example, group leaders should be elected, questioned, challenged, and held accountable by the democracies they govern. Caregivers should come to understand their roles with a close attentiveness to accountees themselves and, when possible, be receptive to the accountee's self-understanding and their questioning of the caregiver's authority (or expressions of it). Also, if a caregiver has a special understanding of a particular accountee, then, practically speaking, they may well be a better accountor to an accountee than a group leader(s)—although, when this is the case, the caregiver should put pressure on the group leader(s) to know how best to govern such accountees. Furthermore, as I have indicated, individuals will often play a major role in determining which groups they participate in, and which caregivers should have authority over them. Nonetheless, while such reciprocity exists and should impact relationships of accountability, this does not call into question the general existence and potential value of orders of accountability, although it certainly complicates how we think practically about instituting them. Again, there is more work that needs to be done to think critically, contextually, and subtly about the practicalities of such orders. Such discussion and debate, however, is beyond the scope of this book.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has described and elaborated on some features and dynamics that characterize the condition of accountability, both generally and, to some extent, theologically. While the analysis of this chapter will hopefully have clarified how we are thinking about accountability, it has also raised a number of issues that call for further elaboration. The purpose of this part of the book, however, is simply to provide a modest conceptual basis from which we can then go on to think theologically about accountability. So, it is not incumbent on us to explore in greater depth the specific issues discussed in this chapter. There is, however, one feature of accountability that we shall consider in more detail: that the condition of accountability is accompanied by the *virtue* of accountability. A more comprehensive analysis of this feature will help us to understand what it means to live accountably. This, in turn, will pave the way for our discussion of human accountability to God in Part II.

3

The Virtue of Accountability

The final major point we shall consider about the concept of accountability before turning to a theology of accountability is that, in a healthy relationship of accountability, the condition of accountability is accompanied by an accountee being characterized by the *virtue* of accountability.

Virtue of Accountability: the disposition that characterizes the accountee who embraces the condition of accountability.

Why describe accountability as a virtue? Much of our discussion so far has focused on benefits that are extrinsic to accountability—as a condition and relationship whereby an accountee achieves certain ends. For example, we have considered accountability as integral to the business of education, healthcare, and moral formation. Such benefits, however, do not themselves make accountability a virtue—that is, a disposition constitutive of moral flourishing and therefore good in itself. For accountability to be a virtue, an accountee must flourish not only *by means of* being accountable, but also *in* living accountably—just as we flourish not only *by means of* being faithful, hopeful, and loving, but also *in being characterized by* the virtues of faith, hope, and love. In short, accountability must be a disposition that is good in itself for an accountee.

What is the ground for thinking about accountability as a virtue? Put simply, it is based on the premise that God creates us to flourish (1) *in and through* embracing God's authority over who we are, and (2) *in and through* embracing the God-given authority of other human beings. God does not create us to flourish in and of ourselves, according to our own authority—that is, according to standards we devise for ourselves in isolation. Rather, God creates us to delight in being accountable to others. Welcoming accountability to God and neighbour, therefore, is an excellent way to be human.

Why is this an excellent way to be human? We shall not speculate over why God defines human excellence in the way that God does. What we perhaps can say, however, albeit cautiously, is that certain aspects of accountability can be seen to reflect the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, especially according to the Gospel of John.¹ What Jesus reveals is that the three persons of the Trinity are

¹ See, e.g., John 17. For an excellent and balanced account of this point, see Thomas McCall's chapter 'The Communion of the Son with the Father' in *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 137–76.

defined by a loving mutuality of giving and receiving, according to which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit necessarily define, and are necessarily defined by, one another²—in an interdependent relationship of mutual entailment unique to the triune God.³ It is according to this love that God creates humans in God's image to reflect a loving mutuality of giving and receiving, according to which they are defined in and by their relationships to God and to one another, albeit in a way unique to humans.

The reason we know this mutuality is a feature of human love, and one that reflects God's love, is because it is made known in and through Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God. Jesus Christ reveals that humans are created to come together as a mutually defining community of love: to be defined, first, as the body of Christ, by the Spirit, according to the Father's love; and to be defined, second, by those sisters and brothers with whom we are united in Christ, again by the Spirit, and again according to the Father's love. God creates us to find fulfilment by sharing in a mutually defining life of fellowship (or *koinonia*)⁴ with one another in the presence of the triune God.

One of the core features of the virtue of accountability is that it disposes us to participate in relationships in which we are defined by our relationships to others.⁵ In these relationships, we serve to fulfil one another by helping each other to become all that we should be within a relationship of accountability. When such a relationship of accountability is virtuous, according to God's creative purposes, this dynamic not only reflects a mutual respect, but also a mutual dependency and belonging that is characteristic of love. This point is beautifully captured by the

² As Kent Dunnington notes, 'Jesus's dependence upon the Father was so fundamental to his self-understanding that he could not even be tempted by the possibility of pride, since he could not identify any work or attribute that was distinctly "his own." . . . Since Jesus never has "his own" being—since his being is always received in full from the Father and then given back to the Father in full through his life of service to others—it never occurs to him that he might need to establish his independence or his distinctive personal importance.' Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 113–14.

³ On this point, we should recognize that we are highly limited in our ability to understand the giving and the receiving that characterizes the triune life of God. Nevertheless, God chose to reveal the triune love of God in and through the Father's relationship to the human Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, it seems entirely appropriate to read the biblical account of Jesus's love of the Father, by the Spirit, as being a divinely endorsed representation of truths about the triune life of God. As Mark Murphy helpfully notes in relation to his own discussion of divine action based on Scripture, 'even if such straightforward readings are not right, nevertheless God was pleased to allow Godself to be described as acting in the ways characterized.' Mark C. Murphy, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 125.

⁴ See 1 John 1:6–7.

⁵ To be clear, this is not to suggest that we should treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a tool for advocating a social programme of accountability. This is prevented by the important points of disanalogy between the Trinity and human social relationships. Furthermore, as we consider below, we are certainly not suggesting that accountability exists within the Trinity—that is, that the Father, Son, and Spirit are accountable to one another. We are simply making the descriptive point that the mutual definition that exists in relationships of accountability can be seen to reflect, in a human way, aspects of the love that are at the very basis of reality. In and through the person of Jesus Christ, this mutual definition is revealed to apply both to God and to human beings.

apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, in his famous passage on love. There he suggests that we find fulfilment when we come face to face with the perfect one, and thereby come to know as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:10–12). Ultimately, it is by encountering God, and thereby coming to learn God's account of who we are, that we discover the fullness of what it is to be human. As we consider in later chapters, this means accountability ultimately needs to be conceived Christologically.

To be clear, the loving mutuality between creatures is utterly different from the loving mutuality of the triune God *in se*—the former is not a repetition of the latter. One major difference is that the triune love of God cannot be characterized by the accountability we find in human relationships. For the purposes of this book, I shall not entertain theological approaches (e.g. process theism) that allow for the idea that, within the immanent life of God, the Father, Son, and Spirit can judge one another relative to their roles in some shared project—that they can develop as characters in one another's stories in the way that finite creatures do. Nonetheless, there are still ways in which human love can be said to reflect the love of God in human relationships of accountability. This is precisely what happens in and through the person of Jesus Christ, in whom the love of God is given human expression in Jesus Christ's accountability to the Father (see John 14:15–31). Again, when other humans become united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, the God-human love of Christ can also be expressed derivatively and generatively in those who share in the body of Christ. Such expression does not simply take place between individual humans and Christ, but also among the individual humans themselves who make up the body of Christ. When this happens, human accountability is not only inspired but also finds its fulfilment.

There will be more to say about the Christological nature of accountability in later chapters. The aim of this chapter, however, is to think about how we might view accountability as a virtue. Since the basis for our thinking here is theological, the chapter will be markedly more theological than the previous ones and will provide a bridge into the theological discussion that will characterize the rest of the book. Nonetheless, this chapter will still seek to think more generally about accountability as a virtue, in a way that can enable our thinking about accountability to be applicable beyond explicitly theological contexts and discussions, albeit while recognizing that every context and discussion has a theological backdrop.

This chapter will be divided into two sections. The first section will focus on the relational nature of the virtue of accountability and ask what it means to consider accountability as a relational virtue. The second will offer a comparison between the virtue of accountability and Thomas Aquinas's virtue of obedience. This will lead us into Chapter 4, where I shall examine the relationship between slavery and accountability, which will provide context for contrasting the concept of accountability with that of exploitation. As we have acknowledged at several points in this book so far, there is a profound danger with elevating uncritically the importance

of accountability. This is because a confused view of accountability (especially when construed as a virtue) can become a crutch for abusive and exploitative relationships between persons with power and those who submit to them. By considering why slavery, as a test case, does not involve a relationship of accountability but a relationship of exploitation, I shall seek to prevent my case for the virtue of accountability being used to support abusive relationships.

1. Accountability as a Relational Virtue

While the concept of a relational virtue occasionally appears in the literature on virtue,⁶ it has received very little focused attention.⁷ Indeed, in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*,⁸ for example, the term does not even appear. One possible reason for this is that virtues tend to be regarded as dispositions that belong to individuals.⁹ While we shall not dispute this, it is also the case there are some virtues that need to be understood in the context of relationships, and which can therefore be helpfully identified as relational virtues. These virtues include, for example, forgivingness, friendliness, gratitude, loyalty, compassion, generosity, and, of course, accountability. The virtue of accountability is the disposition of an accountee who embraces their relationship to an accountant *qua* accountant.

To gain a better grasp of the notion of a relational virtue, the first half of this section will interact with Sungwoo Um's recent article 'What is a Relational Virtue?' and conclude with a general statement about how we might think about accountability as a relational virtue. The second half will then consider,

⁶ See, for example, David P. Gushee, 'Attract Them by Your Way of Life: The Professor's Task in the Christian University', in *The Future of Christian Higher Education*, ed. David S. Dockery and David P. Gushee (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), pp. 146–7; Shirong Luo, 'Relation, Virtue, and Relational Virtue: Three Concepts of Caring', *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): pp. 92–110; Andrew Pinsent, 'Aquinas on Humility and Relational Greatness', in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, ed. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 202–11; and Amilya Amaya, 'Humility in Law', in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, ed. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 451–63.

⁷ The main exceptions to this are Brendan Case, *The Accountable Animal* (London: T&T Clark, 2021); C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019); and Evans's *Living Accountably* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁸ Nancy E. Snow, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹ There are exceptions to this view; for example, Donald Beggs argues for group moral virtues in his article 'The Idea of Group Moral Virtue', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2003): pp. 457–74. Miranda Fricker argues for institutional virtues in her essay 'Can There Be Institutional Virtues?', in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 3, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 235–52. Also, T. Ryan Byerly and Meghan Byerly argue for the notion of collective virtues in their co-authored essays 'Collective Virtue', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 50, no. 1 (2016): pp. 33–50 and 'The Collective Character of Religious Congregations', *Zygon* 54, no. 3 (2019): pp. 680–701. For a critical response to the notion of a collectivist view of virtues, see Sean Cordell's article 'Group Virtues: No Great Leap Forward for Collectivism', *Res Philosophica* 23 (2017): pp. 43–59.

albeit briefly, the theological significance of thinking about accountability as a relational virtue.

1.1 What is a relational virtue?

According to Sungwoo Um, relational virtues underpin excellent participation in intimate relationships such as friendships or family relationships. These virtues include ‘filial piety, parental virtue, or the virtue of friendship (i.e., a good friend’s virtue)’.¹⁰ The role of these virtues is to support a commitment to the normative demands, responsibilities, and expectations that characterize intimate relationships and contribute to the flourishing of their participants. For example, ‘a relationally virtuous child would manifest a special willingness to help her parents when needed and a relationally virtuous friend would have a strong negative affective response to the very idea of betraying her friendship’.¹¹ By supporting such behaviour, relational virtues serve ‘to develop, sustain, deepen, and repair intimate relationships’.¹²

Um distinguishes relational virtues—which are tied to those to whom we are intimately related—from what he refers to as other-regarding virtues. Whereas a relational virtue specifically presupposes an *intimate* relationship, an other-regarding virtue simply requires there be another person as the ‘intentional object’ of that virtue. Um, therefore, has a more specific understanding of relational virtues, which are ‘a distinct subcategory of other-regarding virtues’.¹³ This means, for example, that Um would not consider some of the relational virtues we listed in the introduction to this section—forgiveness, friendliness, gratitude, loyalty, compassion, generosity, and accountability—to be relational virtues, since they do not presuppose an intimate relationship. As such, the view of a relational virtue we are adopting is closer to Shirong Lou’s view of a relational virtue as a ‘virtue that requires some other person(s) as its “intentional object”’, which he develops from Confucian ethics.¹⁴ That said, I should also add that the other person(s) would need to subsist as an intentional object over time, rather than episodically.¹⁵

So why not adopt the distinction Um draws between relational virtues and other-related virtues? The main reason for this is that, from a Christian perspective, there is a sense in which it is virtuous to treat all persons as though we were intimately related to them—as persons who were created to be our brothers and

¹⁰ Sungwoo Um, ‘What Is a Relational Virtue?’, *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 1 (2021): pp. 95–111; quotation from p. 96.

¹¹ Um, ‘What is a Relational Virtue?’, p. 96.

¹² Um, ‘What is a Relational Virtue?’, p. 96.

¹³ Um, ‘What is a Relational Virtue?’, p. 99.

¹⁴ Luo, ‘Relation, Virtue, and Relational Virtue’, p. 104.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Robert Roberts for encouraging me to clarify this.

sisters in Christ. Also, Jesus insists that one of the two greatest commandments is to love your neighbour (including stranger and enemy) *as yourself*—and there is no more intimate relationship than that. To be clear, this does not mean we should relate to complete strangers in the very same way we relate to close friends or family members. In order to relate well to a stranger, a person will need to devote time to coming to know them in their particularity. It is also the case that Scripture suggests we have particular obligations towards certain persons, such as family and church members, that are different from the obligations we have to strangers.¹⁶ Therefore, there are certainly ways in which we have unique loving relations to certain persons, entailing different obligations of loving care. We might say, for example, that to love a stranger as myself obliges me to treat them in the way I would want to be treated by another stranger—it means I should treat the stranger as a family member.¹⁷ Nonetheless, from a Christian perspective, the relational virtues that motivate a person to relate well to a stranger should be akin to the relational virtues that motivate a person to relate well to those they know intimately.

While there may be theological reasons to adopt Luo's broader view of relational virtues, there are three specific features of Um's view that also apply to our view of accountability as a relational virtue. First, for Um, relational virtues are *particular* since they involve 'acting, desiring, and feeling appropriately with regard to particular persons'—'one's relational virtue is "indexed" to a particular person or persons'.¹⁸ He then contrasts relational virtues with 'general virtues like generosity [that] can be cultivated and exercised in relation to any other person in need, including a stranger'.¹⁹ Second, relational virtues are *special* because they involve relating to another person as someone special, to the extent that they give a certain priority to that person over others, giving special weight to their interests. He offers the following example: 'parents want special love from their child, as opposed to impartial altruistic care, which she can have towards any other person.'²⁰ The third relevant point that Um makes about the nature of relational virtues is that they are grounded in a *reciprocal relationship*, one that 'is neither one-sided nor based on a prudential give-and-take mentality'.²¹

How do these three features apply to accountability as a relational virtue? First, the virtue of accountability is *particular* since it requires a relationship towards an accountor who plays a particular role in serving a particular accountee's flourishing. Second, the virtue of accountability involves a *special* relationship in which the accountee prioritizes the special authority of a particular accountor over others relative to a special project—for example, a student will prioritize the authority of

¹⁶ e.g. Mark 7:9–13; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 5:8.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Jared Michelson for pushing me to add this clarification.

¹⁸ Um, 'What is a Relational Virtue?', p. 101.

¹⁹ Um, 'What is a Relational Virtue?', p. 101.

²⁰ Um, 'What is a Relational Virtue?', p. 102.

²¹ Um, 'What is a Relational Virtue?', p. 103.

their rugby coach over their chemistry teacher when it comes to learning how to flourish as a rugby player. Third, the virtue of accountability should often be grounded in a *reciprocal relationship*, one that can help inform the accountor and the accountee how best to fulfil their particular and special roles in a relationship of accountability and, moreover, help to prevent the relationship from becoming overly controlling. That said, there can be relationships of accountability in which reciprocity is not essential, such as the relationship between a player and a referee, in which the referee's judgement of a player need not be informed by an interpersonal relationship.

1.2 Accountability as a relational virtue before God

The common understanding of virtue as an individual disposition means that, for some, the notion of a relational virtue can seem contradictory. For example, according to Aristotle, as Angela Knobel interprets him, 'the more virtuous an agent is, the less he needs to seek the assistance of others in determining the appropriate course of action in a given situation'.²² The problem with such an individualistic account of virtue, as Knobel argues, is that it 'runs contrary to the self-understanding of the virtuous Christian'.²³ A theological understanding of virtue must be grounded in an understanding of (1) the purposes for which God creates humans, and (2) the relationship with God that brings about the fulfilment of these purposes. Knobel elaborates, drawing on Aquinas:

the more virtuous a person of faith is, the more that individual recognizes the need for and relies on divine assistance in the exercise of practical reason. . . . Man needs God's assistance in order to perform acts befitting his participation in the divine life, Aquinas says, in the same way as the moon cannot give off light without the sun, and as the medical student cannot practice his art without the guidance of a doctor. . . . Aquinas believes that it is the Holy Spirit that provides the Christian with the guidance he needs. With grace, men receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and

²² Angela Knobel, 'A Different Kind of Wisdom', in *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Christian Miller, R. Michael Furr, Angela Knobel, and William Fleeson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 352. This point is also reflected in Thomas Bivins's comment that 'responsible actors, because of moral maturity, are capable of self-motivation in their responsive adjustments for actions they have performed, while accountable actors must rely on external pressure (blame or credit) for this adjustment'. Thomas Bivins, 'Responsibility and Accountability', in *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*, ed. K. Fitzpatrick and C. Bronstein (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 23. Here, Bivins assumes that accountability is a crutch for those who are morally immature.

²³ Knobel, 'A Different Kind of Wisdom', p. 352. A similar point is also made by Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood in *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 66–7.

fear), which make men receptive to the ‘motion’ or ‘inspiration’ of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps most importantly, when Aquinas speaks of man’s need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he uses the word *always*.²⁴

While this passage does not refer to the virtue of accountability per se, it beautifully captures the view we are considering. Indeed, in line with our view, this passage could have begun: ‘the more [the person of faith embodies the virtue of accountability (to God)], the more that individual recognizes the need for and relies on divine assistance in the exercise of practical reason.’ The virtue of accountability supports and accompanies a person’s faith in God by leading them to embrace God as the ultimate authority who defines humans and helps them to achieve ends that serve their flourishing. To draw on our concluding paragraph from the previous subsection, this virtue is *particular* insofar as it disposes humans to embrace God as a wholly unique authority, albeit one whose authority is all-encompassing—and, in this sense, is universal. Also, it is *special*, insofar as it disposes humans to prioritize God as the ultimate authority over all.

If we continue to read the above passage as descriptive of the virtue of accountability, it could lead to the suggestion that it is the virtue of accountability which, by the power of the Spirit, motivates a person to embrace the divine assistance that is foundational to practical reason—that is, reason oriented towards some activity or end that characterizes human flourishing before God. It could also then lead to the suggestion that the virtue of accountability is the foundational virtue: that it is the virtue that motivates persons to embrace the divine assistance that undergirds all the other virtues that are befitting of active participation in the divine life, such as faith, hope, and love.

So, does this mean that accountability (to God) is not simply *a* virtue but *the foundational* virtue? As I noted in the introductory chapter, while there may be some reasons to think of accountability as foundational to the other virtues, there are also difficulties with such a claim. If the Holy Spirit does not give a person virtues such as faith, hope, and/or love (in relation to God), it is hard to know how they could be motivated to respect God’s authority and embrace accountability to God.²⁵ As such, it does not seem possible to extricate accountability from other

²⁴ Knobel, ‘A Different Kind of Wisdom’, p. 355, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II.68.2. Notably, Aquinas does not always endorse a relational account of human virtue. For example, Aquinas adopts the Aristotelian principle of self-sufficiency when he writes: ‘The more dignified a thing is, the more self-sufficient it is, since whatever needs another’s help is by that fact proven to be deficient.’ Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship: To the King of Cyprus*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1979), 2.3.136.

²⁵ Aquinas makes a similar point when he considers whether the virtue of obedience could be regarded as a foundational virtue. (As we review in Section 2, Aquinas’s account of the virtue of obedience closely resembles what we are calling the virtue of accountability.) Aquinas presents the virtue of obedience as foundational when he notes that ‘acts of virtue are meritorious before God through being performed out of obedience to God’s will.’ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.104.3. This leads him to argue that the virtue of obedience is the most praiseworthy of the moral

virtues. In addition to its interconnection with faith, hope, and love, the virtue of accountability also seems to be bound up with other virtues, such as humility, honesty, practical wisdom, diligence, and empathy.²⁶ In light of the difficulties with extricating the virtue of accountability, it is perhaps best to think of it as a virtue that clusters together a number of other virtues in a unique way.

Not only is it difficult to extricate the virtue of accountability from other virtues, it can be difficult to distinguish it from other virtues as well—especially the virtues of responsibility and obedience (depending on how we define them). Nonetheless, if we are to consider accountability as a virtue in its own right, we do need to be able to present accountability as a distinctive virtue. We have already distinguished accountability from responsibility in Chapter 1; now we shall consider how to distinguish the virtue of accountability from that of obedience, as Aquinas understands the latter.

2. The Virtue of Obedience

As I mentioned in the introduction, the word ‘accountability’ emerged only within the last two hundred years, becoming prominent within the last fifty. While ‘accountability’ may not have had a long history, the virtue of accountability closely resembles another virtue that has had a long history: the virtue of obedience. The connection between these two virtues has recently been pointed out by Brendan Case, who compares Aquinas’s account of the virtue of obedience to his own view of the virtue of accountability—defining the latter as ‘a forward-looking disposition for being held accountable by those to whom one is answerable’.²⁷ Although Case’s view of the virtue of accountability is not identical to the one I am proposing, they do bear a close resemblance. So, building on Case’s excellent work, this section will compare the virtue of obedience to the virtue of accountability. This comparison will enable us to specify further how to think distinctively about the virtue of accountability. It will also connect our discussion to the leading theological exponent of virtue in the Christian tradition, Thomas Aquinas.

How does Aquinas understand the virtue of obedience? As Case interprets him, the virtue of obedience is ‘a disposition to respond favourably to rightly-constituted authority’s commands, but still more, to actively anticipate those commands, complying ahead of time’.²⁸ When a person possesses this virtue,

virtues. However, he then qualifies this point by adding that the virtue of obedience is grounded in the theological virtue of faith: ‘we come to know the sublime nature of divine authority, by reason of which the power to command is competent to God.’ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.104.3.

²⁶ For a helpful discussion of humility, honesty, and practical wisdom as virtues that are especially helpful for persons who seek to live accountably, see ch. 5 in Evans, *Living Accountably*.

²⁷ Case, *The Accountable Animal*, p. 8; see also pp. 32–3.

²⁸ Case, *The Accountable Animal*, p. 33.

they embrace their obligations to a 'superior' and desire to act accordingly. Also, the virtue of obedience is a sub-virtue of justice, meaning the virtue of obedience expresses a commitment to justice. For Aquinas, when a virtuous person obeys the just commands of a 'superior', they do so 'through love of justice'—and not, for example, 'through fear of punishment'.²⁹ Love of justice inspires a love of obedience, giving persons a virtuous disposition to see obedience as a good in itself rather than simply a means to avoid punishment or achieve a reward.

Undergirding Aquinas's account of the virtue of obedience is his belief in a divinely established order of nature, according to which 'inferiors' (*inferiores*) should be guided by 'superiors' (*superiores*), and 'inferiors' should obey their 'superiors'.³⁰ How does Aquinas judge who is 'superior' and who is 'inferior'? In many respects, his position reflects the more hierarchical views of medieval society—so much so that certain aspects of his position will be offensive to those who are more egalitarian in their commitments.³¹ While he never questions that 'superiors' and 'inferiors' share an equal dignity, he does believe there are functional differences between different members of society. That is, he believes some people have 'superior' abilities which give them an authority to help those with 'inferior' abilities. While some of the application of Aquinas's view is deeply flawed, and while the 'superior'/'inferior' language is not ideal, his general point is uncontroversial. Indeed, the view of accountability I am proposing assumes this very point. For example, were we to extend Aquinas's thinking to some of the analogies we have been considering, we could say that teachers have some superior abilities that they use to help their intellectually inferior students (when it comes to education), or we could say that doctors have some superior abilities relative to their intellectually inferior patients (when it comes to medical treatment).

There is, however, a difference in emphasis between Aquinas's view of the virtue of obedience and our view of the virtue of accountability, one accentuated by Aquinas's language of 'superiors' and 'inferiors'. Aquinas embraces a more paternalistic (at times, bordering on authoritarian) account of power relations between 'superiors' and 'inferiors', and this is particularly evident in his understanding of the relationship between slaves and masters, and men and women. In contrast, our view of accountability places a greater emphasis on the potential value of reciprocity between an accountant and an accountee. This is evident, for example, in our contention that it is not only patients who are accountable to

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.104.3.

³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.104.1.

³¹ This is particularly evident when it comes to Aquinas's views on the intellectual superiority of men over women (*Summa Theologica*, I.92.1) and, as we shall discuss in Chapter 4, masters over slaves, found in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2007), I.3.10. That said, we should be clear here that Aquinas does not think women are essentially defective; see Michael Nolan, 'The Defective Male: What Aquinas Really Said', *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): pp. 156–66.

doctors, but also doctors who are accountable to patients. Such reciprocity is important because it enables accountors to pay more attention to whether they are using their authority to serve the needs of a particular accountee, whose needs may be different from what an accountor may initially assume. Stressing reciprocity can also encourage a particular accountee to think more carefully about whether an accountor is genuinely serving their flourishing before they comply with the accountor's judgement. As such, when relationships of accountability are reciprocal, it is more difficult for accountors to abuse their power. In much of Aquinas's discussion of obedience, however, the 'inferior' who possesses the virtue of obedience is expected to obey their 'superior' promptly simply because the 'superior' is seen to have 'superior' abilities; very little attention is given to the possibility that an 'inferior' may have abilities that can make them an appropriate judge of a 'superior'. This is evident, for example, in his insistence that a wife (whom Aquinas suggests is intellectually inferior) must obey her husband (who is intellectually superior) even against her own will.³² It is also evident in much of Aquinas's understanding of the relationship between a master and a slave, which we shall discuss in Chapter 4.

If we were to try to interpret Aquinas's view more sympathetically (from a more egalitarian perspective), it is possible to develop his account in a way that recognizes a more reciprocal relationship between 'superiors' and 'inferiors', and which would therefore bring it into closer alignment with our view of accountability. Indeed, in the *Summa Theologica*, we find some (albeit limited) support for a reciprocal relationship between a 'superior' and an 'inferior'. For example, in his account of the slave's obedience to a master, Aquinas cites Acts 5:29 to qualify that a master's authority is delimited by the authority of God.³³ He argues that while human beings are subject to obey God in all things, they are only subject to obey human 'superiors' 'in certain things and in a particular way'.³⁴ He puts this point in context by noting that 'slaves [*servi*] are not bound to obey their masters, nor children their parents, in the question of contracting marriage or of remaining in

³² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.164.2. On Aquinas's view of the intellectual inferiority of women, see *Summa Theologiae* 1.92.1. As Aquinas notes here, the subjection of a woman to her husband is a consequence of the Fall. For further discussion of Aquinas's view on this issue, see Colleen McCluskey, 'An Unequal Relationship between Equals: Thomas Aquinas on Marriage', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2007): pp. 1–18. We should perhaps qualify here, as John Finnis points out, that, strictly speaking, 'Aquinas's principles, and even his particular conclusions taken as a whole, do not underwrite domination and exploitation of wives by husbands. For him, authority is always responsibility, and is justified only so far as it is exercised for common good.' John Finnis, *Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 174. While this may be true theoretically, practically speaking, Aquinas's kind of reasoning can certainly be shown to support societal structures that do provide fertile ground for domination and exploitation. See Felicia Pratto and Angela Walker, 'Dominance in Disguise: Power, Beneficence, and Exploitation in Personal Relationships', in *The Use and Abuse of Power*, ed. Annette Lee-Chai and John Bargh (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), pp. 95–6.

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.5.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.5.

the state of virginity or the like'.³⁵ Based on this point, Brendan Case argues we can develop Aquinas's view to suggest that 'with respect to his liberty to marry, the slave is in fact the superior, and the master the inferior'.³⁶ The suggestion that, for Aquinas, superiority is relative to a particular sphere of activity also finds support in the following passage:

in matters concerning the disposal of actions and human affairs, a subject is bound to obey his superior within the sphere of his authority; for instance a soldier must obey his general in matters relating to war, a servant his master in matters touching the execution of the duties of his service, a son his father in matters relating to the conduct of his life and the care of the household; and so forth.³⁷

Here, Aquinas suggests that a 'superior's' authority over an 'inferior' is relative to a shared project that defines their respective roles.³⁸ So, when it comes to the shared project of a slave's marriage,³⁹ the master should submit to (or obey) the slave's request to get married—which, in a certain sense, makes the master an 'inferior' and the slave a 'superior', and could be said to require the master to exhibit the virtue of obedience in relation to the slave's request. While it is possible to develop Aquinas's view to support a more reciprocal account of a relationship of obedience, Aquinas himself shows little interest in developing his view in this way. Had he done so, he may have found himself obliged to qualify his emphasis on the 'superiority' of masters over slaves, or men over women, in relationships of obedience.

For the moment, let us set aside the apparent flaws in Aquinas's medieval view of obedience and consider whether his view can be brought into alignment with our view of accountability. To do this, let us employ Aquinas's reasoning to our example of a relationship between a doctor and a patient. Again, according to our view, we can say that a doctor is accountable to a patient, which implies that the patient has a certain authority over the doctor. If, therefore, a patient requests not to undergo a certain form of treatment (e.g. to avoid crossing certain ethical

³⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.5. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province translate *servi* as 'servants'. However, by today's standards, I think 'slavery' is a more accurate word. We discuss this further in Chapter 4.

³⁶ Case, *The Accountable Animal*, p. 24. A similar point is made by Paul Cornish, who notes that when it comes to the natural human inclinations 'to pursue the basic goods of preservation and procreation', Aquinas recognizes that a certain 'mastery is retained even in the condition of slavery'. Paul Cornish, 'Marriage, Slavery, and Natural Rights in the Political Thought of Aquinas', *Review of Politics* 60, no. 3 (1998): pp. 545–61; quotation from p. 553.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.5.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.5.

³⁹ As horrific as it is to describe marriage as involving a shared project between a slave and a master (whom they are not marrying), the nature of the master–slave relationship (on Aquinas's account) is such that a slave's decision to get married will require the compliance of their master, which gives the master a certain share in the slave's project of getting married.

boundaries), we could perhaps say that the doctor is characterized by the virtue of obedience if they respect the patient's request. Alternatively, if we were to think about the patient's accountability to a doctor—and therefore the doctor's authority over the patient—we could perhaps say that a patient is characterized by the virtue of obedience if they embrace the doctor's recommendations to limit certain habits or receive a certain treatment. If it is appropriate to use the language of obedience in this way, then we can construe Aquinas's view of the virtue of obedience in a way that resembles our view of the virtue of accountability.

Yet, without careful qualification, it will likely seem strange to say that a doctor should obey their patient (and vice versa)—stranger than saying a doctor should be accountable to their patient (and vice versa). This is because the language of obedience tends to carry paternalistic and/or authoritarian connotations, which is evident not only in Aquinas's view of obedience, but also in how obedience is understood today.⁴⁰ While the language of accountability can also carry these connotations, it certainly carries them to a lesser degree. So, although it may be possible to define the virtue of accountability and the virtue of obedience in similar ways, it would seem the language of accountability is more fitting when it comes to encouraging a reciprocal understanding of the relationship between accountant and accountee.⁴¹

Is there any other way to distinguish these two virtues? We could add that whereas the virtue of obedience primarily concerns a disposition to embrace the *just commands* of someone with authority to give those commands, the virtue of accountability primarily concerns an accountee's disposition to embrace an accountant's *just account* of them. This distinction, however, is not altogether straightforward. For example, it could be argued that, when the 'inferior' possesses the virtue of obedience, they embrace the 'superior's' commands *because* they embrace the 'superior's' just account of them. However, if this were so, then it would make sense to say that the virtue of accountability is foundational to the 'inferior's' virtue of obedience, in a way that enables us to maintain a distinction between them.

To conclude, if it is the case that embracing the Thomistic virtue of obedience is more likely to encourage paternalistic or authoritarian relationships between 'superiors' and 'inferiors' which are resistant to reciprocity, then the distinctions we have drawn are significant. These distinctions are especially relevant when we recognize that the prompt submissiveness of 'inferiors' to 'superiors', which is stressed in Aquinas's account of obedience,⁴² has been a crutch for abusive relationships. In making this point, I should add two qualifications. First, I am

⁴⁰ This is evident, for example, in the *Paperback Oxford English Dictionary's* association of 'authoritarian' with 'strict obedience to authority'. See 'authoritarian', in *Paperback Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Maurice Waite, 7th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 41.

⁴¹ C. Stephen Evans makes a similar point in *Living Accountably*, p. 33.

⁴² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.104.2.

not rejecting the possibility of considering obedience as a virtue when it is correctly understood as a species of justice. In a just and loving relationship, such as the relationship between God and creatures, it can certainly be virtuous to be disposed to obey someone with legitimate authority. Second, it is also the case that seeking to cultivate the virtue of accountability can generate a submissiveness that will increase the likelihood of an abusive relationship between an accountant and an accountee. This is a serious risk. As such, we shall devote Chapter 4 to analysing the virtue of accountability in a way that will help us to recognize how this danger might be avoided. More specifically, we shall consider why we should not consider the relationship between a slave and a master should as a relationship of accountability, but rather as a relationship of exploitation. By distinguishing between these two kinds of relationships, we can develop a clearer understanding of the virtue of accountability in a way that makes it more resistant to abuse.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has provided a view of accountability as the virtue that characterizes the accountee who embraces their accountability to the accountant. It also examined some of the distinctive features of this virtue. Specifically, we considered what it means to think about accountability as a relational virtue. We then discussed how we might distinguish this virtue from the closely related virtue of obedience. We ended this chapter by acknowledging the risk of the virtue of accountability generating a submissiveness that could expose persons to abusive relationships. It will be the aim of next chapter to address this concern.

Slavery—Accountability or Exploitation?

Persons with power easily get away with making false claims to authority. This happens when they deceive themselves and others into believing they have legitimate authority. What is more, confirmation bias makes it easy for them to find support for their false claims—for example, from religious or areligious texts, from cultural sources, and/or from anyone they can find who accepts their power. When such persons get away with falsely claiming authority, they are positioned to abuse those under their power. Given this danger, there is a need to think carefully about how our view of the virtue of accountability can avoid making persons prone to abuse by those whose authority is illegitimate. This is important not because, generally speaking, virtues should never expose persons to abuse; virtues will often lead persons into harm's way, as is evident from the history of martyrdom. Rather, it is important because accountability is a virtue specifically tied to relationships that, by our definition, serve the flourishing of accountees. So, in this chapter, I shall give detailed attention to how we might construe accountability in a way that is resistant to abuse. To provide context for our discussion, we shall ask specifically why the relationship between a master and an enslaved person is not one of accountability.

What do we mean by slavery? In different contexts, slavery has taken on different forms, so there will always be limits to any normative definition we propose. However, drawing on R. M. Hare's broad definition, we shall understand slavery as an institution in which persons: (1) have their rights and privileges suppressed and are subjected to certain obligations from which others are free; and (2) are considered to belong to another who falsely, and thus unjustly, claims authority over them.¹ While the first point is important for explaining how slavery undermines human flourishing, the second is particularly relevant to our discussion. It is when a master unjustly but convincingly claims authority over an enslaved person that a relationship of exploitation can masquerade as a relationship of accountability.

How can such claims be convincing? It is because it can be easy for masters (and other supporters of slavery) to use their power to spin and/or perpetuate narratives that seek to legitimize their authority over enslaved persons. They do this, for example, by portraying themselves as being committed to the flourishing

¹ R. M. Hare, 'What Is Wrong with Slavery?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (1979): pp. 103–21; at p. 105.

of those who are enslaved. Such narrative power is not merely coercive; it can also be self-perpetuating, because it seduces persons (both narrators and their victims) into recognizing the power of those to whom the narratives grant power.² When masters are portrayed as being a friend to those who are enslaved, enslaved persons not only find themselves physically enslaved to certain obligations, but also doxastically enslaved—believing narratives that deceptively legitimize the authority masters claim over them. Under these circumstances, enslaved persons are not only interpreted according to the narratives of others; nor are they simply treated according to these narratives; but they can also be led to interpret themselves according to these narratives. Once enslaved and diminished by such narratives, those who are enslaved can be led to believe that slavery is appropriate for them. Consequently, they can be deceived into thinking they are accountable to a master and, therefore, must embody the virtue of accountability in relation to that master. So, in short, when false narratives are woven, it is easy to portray exploitation as accountability.

To challenge approaches that seek to legitimize exploitation, this chapter will consider how two of this book's key interlocutors, the apostle Paul and Thomas Aquinas, could accept narratives that gave legitimacy to the authority of masters over enslaved persons. In response, I shall explain why slavery does not meet our criteria for accountability. Clarity on this will help us to grasp more fully not only what accountability is but also what it is not. At the same time, I acknowledge it can be difficult to judge whether a relationship is one of accountability or one of exploitation. This is because it is easy to disguise exploitation as accountability by spinning false narratives. To address the possibility of deception, I propose that practical wisdom, grounded in a true narrative, is crucial for making good judgements about authority. We then engage in some conceptual analysis of the distinction between accountability and exploitation.

1. Paul and Aquinas on Slavery

What does the apostle Paul have to say about slavery, based on the canonical writings that bear his authorial name?³ On the one hand, Paul tells those who are

² For an excellent discussion of how oppressive narratives can damage human identity, and how damaged identities can be repaired through telling stories that counter the oppressive narratives, see Hilde Lindemann, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). As I argue in Part II, the gospel narrative constitutes the core counter-narrative for delivering persons from a worldview distorted by the oppressive narrative of sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this point in his account of Jesus Christ as the 'counter Logos' (*Gegenlogos*) to the 'human Logos' distorted by sin; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 12, ed. L. Rasmussen, trans. I. Best and D. Higgins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 303.

³ The 'Paul' we are engaging with here may not be the 'historical Paul', since most contemporary scholars would argue that Paul did not write Ephesians and Colossians. For the purposes of this book, however, we shall engage with the 'canonical Paul', constructed according to the thirteen canonical

enslaved to obey their 'earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ' (Eph. 6:5; see also Col. 3:22–4; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10).⁴ On the other hand, Paul commands masters to treat the persons they've enslaved as equals, insisting they must 'not threaten them since [the Lord] is both their Master and yours . . . , and there is no favouritism with him' (Eph. 6:9; see also Col. 4:1). He encourages enslaved Christians to be manumitted (1 Cor. 7:21), and even commands persons to resist becoming enslaved if they can (1 Cor. 7:23). Lastly, in one of his better-known statements, Paul proclaims that in Christ there is 'no slave or free . . . for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). As these passages and others suggest, Paul's attitude towards slavery is complicated.⁵ In short, while he recognizes that enslaved persons share equality with their masters, and while he shows a subversive resistance to slavery, he is also willing to hold them accountable for fulfilling their roles as enslaved persons.

We do not have space here to consider Paul's statements in context, so there are limits to what we can say about Paul's attitude towards slavery in this chapter. But without going into all the nuances of his view, it would be fair to ask why Paul's attitude towards slavery was not more critical, regardless of how much slavery was a part of the status quo at the time. As John Barclay notes: 'If slavery were really a moral evil, it is hard to see how one can justify not criticizing it just because it is a part of the fabric of society.'⁶ Moreover, in a world where slavery remains very much a part of the status quo in many areas of the world and spreads by exploiting the vulnerable, marginalized, and impoverished, there are important reasons to ask why Paul did not offer a more consistent opposition to slavery.

While there may be questionable elements to Paul's approach, it is possible to offer some historical explanation for why Paul did not challenge the institution of slavery in the way the church later would—and, indeed, would do so using some of Paul's own statements. As N. T. Wright points out, in Paul's context, slavery 'was how things got done. It was the electricity of the ancient world; try imagining your home or your town without the ability to plug things in and switch them on, and you will realize how unthinkable it was to them that there should be no slaves.'⁷ The implication of Wright's point here is that the reason Paul recognized slavery had a valid role to play in society is that his imagination, his concerns, and,

letters written under Paul's name. Without offering a detailed discussion of Pauline authorship, there are valid theological reasons to engage with the canonical Paul; in particular, the church's reception of Pauline thought has traditionally been based on its engagement with the canonical Paul.

⁴ Paul's views are echoed in 1 Pet. 2:18: 'Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.'

⁵ For a more in-depth assessment of Paul's views on slavery, see John Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): pp. 161–86, and J. Byron, 'Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Question in New Testament Scholarship', *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2004): pp. 116–39.

⁶ John Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 124.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 32.

perhaps, his ambitions were limited by his respective context.⁸ The slavery narrative of Paul's day was just too dominant for Paul to be able to contemplate abolition. So rather than calling for the abolition of slavery, he sought to reform it by holding masters to a higher account, according to which they should treat those who are enslaved as equals. In this respect, Paul did offer a radical challenge to the status quo. Nonetheless, he also remained committed to giving enslaved persons an account of how they could fulfil their roles as followers of Christ in the context of their enslavement.⁹ The effect of this, however, was to recognize a place for slavery within the body of Christ, at least in his context.

Thomas Aquinas echoes Paul's approach in many ways. Like Paul, Aquinas had a clear aversion to slavery. Indeed, at some points, he comes across as even more critical of slavery than Paul. He is clear that, ultimately, all persons share an equal dignity under God and goes so far as to assert that 'nothing is so repugnant to human nature as slavery'.¹⁰ Moreover, he refers to slavery as a 'civil death':

For life is chiefly manifested in ability to move; he that cannot move save by the agency of others, may be accounted dead. Now, a slave has no power over himself, but is governed by the will of his master; and therefore this condition of bondage may be compared to death. Hence a man, who, for the love of another, delivers himself to bondage, practises the same perfection of charity, as he who exposes himself to death. Nay, we may say that he does more; for slavery is more abhorrent to our nature than is death.¹¹

Despite Aquinas's disgust at slavery, he still saw a place for it in our postlapsarian world; indeed, at times, he seems more willing than Paul to justify it.¹² In the *Summa Theologica*, he is appreciative of Aristotle's view of slavery, according to which masters and enslaved persons have complementary roles to play in society,

⁸ John Barclay also makes this point when he writes: 'To ask why he did not advocate the abolition of slavery in its entirety is perhaps to pose an anachronistic and inappropriate question: no-one in the ancient world (not even those involved in the slave-revolts) could imagine the social economy operating without slaves.' Barclay, 'Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', p. 182.

⁹ On this point, see Nijay Gupta, 'Cruciform Onesimus? Considering How a Slave Would Respond to Paul's Call for a Cross-Shaped Lifestyle', *The Expository Times* 133, no. 8 (2022): pp. 325–33.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *The Religious State, the Episcopate and the Priestly Office*, trans. F. J. Procter, OP (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), p. 45.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Religious State*, p. 79.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd edn (1920; New Advent online edn, 2017), II–II.189.6. To be fair to Aquinas, it is not always clear what precisely he has in mind when he uses the term *servus*, which can be translated either 'slave' or 'servant'. As the above quote suggests, as well as many of Aquinas's other references to *servus*, he often presents it as a role that involves a certain complicity and freedom on the part of the slave, which would make it more morally acceptable. In such instances, as John Finnis points out, it is perhaps better to interpret *servus* as a bondservant. Nonetheless, even if we opt for a more charitable interpretation of Aquinas, as Finnis himself points out, it is still disconcerting to watch Aquinas 'passing up many an opportunity to challenge [the institution of slavery] at its root'. John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 184.

even though he rejected Aristotle's view that enslaved persons are essentially inferior according to their nature. Drawing on Aristotle, he writes, 'the fact that this particular man should be a slave rather than another man, is based, not on natural reason, but on some resultant utility, in that it is useful to this man to be ruled by a wiser man, and to be helped by the former'.¹³ For Aquinas, 'a slave belongs to his master, because he is his instrument'.¹⁴ He also argues that slavery 'belongs to the right of nations', insofar as it serves the flourishing of society.¹⁵ Yet he did not think that a master has total authority over enslaved persons. Insofar as an enslaved person is human, and therefore not reducible to their role as a slave, Aquinas argued that slaves have certain, albeit limited, rights. Before God, for Aquinas, there 'are certain laws regulating the relation . . . of a master to his slave'.¹⁶

In response to our account of Paul's and Aquinas's attitude towards slavery, it could rightly be pointed out that neither Paul nor Aquinas were acquiescent towards the worst forms of slavery. One could rightly argue, for example, that the forms of slavery they were addressing were very different from the ethnic-based chattel slavery of the antebellum South in the United States. Nevertheless, both Paul and Aquinas were willing to tolerate forms of slavery that meet our definition of slavery and which, by today's standards, fulfil widely accepted criteria used to define modern slavery.¹⁷ So, for anyone opposed to modern slavery, any attempt to abstract, universalize, and reproduce some of Paul's and Aquinas's statements about slavery should be concerning—lest such contextual statements become a way to see a place for modern slavery or any other form of exploitation in the contemporary world.

Given the sanctified authority of 'Saint Paul' and 'Saint Thomas' and their foundational roles in the formation of church dogma, there are valid theological reasons to be hesitant to question their approaches—especially Paul's, whose words are enshrined in the canon of Scripture. Nonetheless, if the abolition of

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.57.3 (drawing on Aristotle's *Politics*). In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Aquinas interprets Aristotle's view to be that there are some humans with an 'eminence of reason' that makes them 'by nature' fit to be masters over those with deficient reason, who are fit to be enslaved. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2007), 1.3.10. He considers the difference between these two groups of humans as comparable to the difference between the soul and the body, and between human beings and irrational animals. He then cites Solomon's word in Proverbs 11:29: 'The stupid will serve the wise.'

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.57.4.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.57.3.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.57.4. Although he then adds that, insofar as the slave is 'something belonging to another, the perfect idea of "right" or "just" is wanting to them'.

¹⁷ Janne Mende helpfully summarizes contemporary views on modern slavery as having 'three denominators': 'first, the control of a person over another, second, an involuntary aspect in their relation, and third, the element of exploitation.' Janne Mende, 'The Concept of Modern Slavery: Definition, Critique, and the Human Rights Frame', *Human Rights Review* 20 (2019): pp. 229–48; quotation from p. 233; see also 'What Is Modern Slavery?', Anti-Slavery International, accessed 29 December 2020, www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/; 2012 Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery, in Jean Allain, *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 376.

slavery is a moral imperative, and if the slavery they accepted was exploitative, then we have reason to go beyond some of things they had to say to their contexts. Moreover, given Paul's and Aquinas's commitment to the equal dignity of enslaved persons, as well as their (relative) resistance to the dehumanization of the enslaved, we can easily argue that the general thrust of Paul's and Aquinas's theology invites us to go further in challenging the persistence of this institution.¹⁸ Other points need to be made about Paul's and Aquinas's respective approaches. Before coming to this, however, let us consider how we might challenge the suggestion that the relationship between a master and an enslaved person is one of accountability.

2. Slavery and Accountability

Based on our definition of accountability, there are three reasons why slavery does not exemplify the condition of accountability—why an enslaved person is not accountable to a master.

1. *A master does not have legitimate authority to judge aspects of who an enslaved person is and should be in their role in the shared project of slavery.* This reason is based on the premise that no (mere) human accountor has a right or authority to claim ownership over an accountee (irrespective of the status quo), let alone to judge them or hold them accountable on this basis. In the narratives of creation and redemption, God does not give non-divine accountors the authority to own other humans as possessions. Ultimately, God is the only true master—and so human authority must always be understood relatively, under and according to God's authority.
2. *The shared project of slavery is not directly oriented towards an end(s) of and/or for the enslaved person.* This reason is based on the premise that slavery neither directly fulfils nor directly serves ends that are proper to humans, according to God's creative purposes. Moreover, it undermines such ends. Slavery, therefore, is neither characterized by nor serves human flourishing; rather, it is dehumanizing.
3. *Slavery does not involve a relationship in which a master is oriented towards an end(s) of and/or for the enslaved person.* This reason is based on the

¹⁸ For a discussion of this point in relation to Paul, see C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Argument of Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 107–8; Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), pp. 151–63; Lisa M. Bowens's section 'Paul as a Figure of Liberation and Equality, and of Shared Experience' in her *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 293–6. For a defence of Aquinas on this point, see Stephen J. Brett, *Slavery and the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

premise that slavery violates the reciprocity condition (when this condition is a relevant factor). That is, it is contrary to a mutual love between a master and an enslaved person, according to which a master seeks to bring about the fulfilment of an enslaved person in a way that is true to who God creates them to be. In a true relationship of accountability, the love an accountant shows to an accountee should be every bit as deferent as the accountee's respect for the accountant.

These reasons and their underlying premises seem uncontroversial, so we shall simply take them to be true.¹⁹ I might add, however, that these reasons are firmly grounded in a theological conviction that is foundational to our view of accountability: that God commands all humans to love and respect one another as persons who share equal value and dignity—'to love your neighbour *as yourself*'. If a master truly loves their neighbour in this way, it will not be a viable option to enslave them rather than employ them as a free worker for fair pay, even though such an option may have been hard to imagine amid the depravity of certain contexts. In light of these reasons as to why slavery fails to meet the conditions for a relationship of accountability, let us now consider why the enslaved person cannot be said to be characterized by the virtue of accountability in their capacity as an enslaved person.

In the previous chapter, I defined the virtue of accountability as the disposition that characterizes the accountee who embraces the condition of accountability. So, very simply, since slavery does not meet the definition of the condition of accountability, it follows that the enslaved person cannot cultivate the virtue of accountability in their capacity as an enslaved person. However, to try to become clearer about why an enslaved person *qua* enslaved person cannot express the virtue of accountability, let us consider a scenario that could complicate this basic response.

Suppose that a child, Sonja, has cultivated the virtue of accountability by learning to respect the legitimate authority of her parents, teachers, doctors, and/or other legitimate authorities in her community. Now imagine Sonja is captured and forced into slavery. Under these circumstances, it is possible for Sonja to find herself enslaved to a master who spins and/or perpetuates a narrative that oppresses her and deceives her into believing the following:

¹⁹ The uncontroversial nature of these reasons is particularly true theologically. However, even on the basis of a contemporary secular account of human rights, these reasons find unanimous international support. As James C. Hathaway points out, 'the duty to eradicate slavery is one of only two human rights clearly identified by the International Court of Justice as an *erga omnes* norm'. James C. Hathaway, 'The Human Rights Quagmire of "Human Trafficking"', *Virginia Journal of International Law* 49, no. 1 (2008): pp. 1–59; quotation from p. 7. But a commitment to the eradication of slavery should not only be viewed in legal terms, but, as Janne Mende argues, it should also be considered normative, grounded in the 'universally applicable and normatively well-founded yardsticks for freedom, decent work, equality, and dignity'. Mende, 'Concept of Modern Slavery', p. 243.

1. *The master has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who Sonja is and should be in her role in the shared project of slavery.* Sonja may be led to believe this by being told the master is, in some way, superior to her.²⁰ Or she could perhaps be told that slavery is essential to the functioning of society, which requires some persons to have the right and authority to treat others as enslaved persons.
2. *Slavery is oriented towards an end(s) of and/or for Sonja—that is, ‘for her own good’.*²¹ She could be led to believe that slavery provides her with the shelter and sustenance she needs to flourish, and which she would not otherwise have. Furthermore, she may even be led to believe that slavery provides her with a vocation that enables her to be a contributing member of society. Alternatively, Sonja might otherwise have been captured as a prisoner of war, which could lead her to the conviction that slavery is far better for her than the alternatives (which may include capital punishment).
3. *The master is committed to helping Sonja achieve her end(s).* The master could convince her—and perhaps convince themselves—that, while the master benefits from Sonja’s work, they are committed to caring for Sonja: to helping her fulfil her role as a servant, as well as providing her with basic needs which she would not otherwise have.²²

Were Sonja to be convinced of these things, she could be deceived into believing she is accountable to the master in the way that she was to the accountors in her community.²³ This would enable the master to exploit the habitual respect for power Sonja developed as a by-product of cultivating the virtue of accountability in her community.²⁴ Strictly speaking, however, as we shall now consider, it would not enable the master to exploit Sonja’s virtue of accountability.

²⁰ As J. H. Turner and R. Singleton show, in the antebellum South, white people spun narratives about how Black people were inferior, childlike, and savage in order to justify slavery as a benevolent institution that served the flourishing of slaves. J. H. Turner and R. Singleton, ‘A Theory of Ethnic Oppression: Toward a Reintegration of Cultural and Structural Concepts in Ethnic Relations Theory’, *Social Forces* 56 (1978): pp. 1001–18.

²¹ The connection of this phrase with abusive paternalistic relationships is documented in Alice Miller’s contemporary classic *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Noonday Press, 1990).

²² We find such a view being taken in defence of slavery by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Alan Galloway, ‘The Origins of Slaveholders’ Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South’, *Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 3 (1987): pp. 369–94; Kenneth P. Minkema, ‘Jonathan Edwards’s Defense of Slavery’, *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): pp. 23–59.

²³ For an excellent discussion of the relationship between paternalism and slavery, see Howard McGary, ‘Paternalism and Slavery’, in *Between Slavery and Freedom: Philosophy and American Slavery*, ed. Howard McGary and Bill E. Lawson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 16–34.

²⁴ This point finds support from Peter Kim et al., who argue that while trust has been shown to have numerous benefits, it is also, by definition, a psychological state that makes a person more vulnerable to being violated. Peter H. Kim, Donald L. Ferrin, Cecily D. Cooper, and Kurt T. Dirks, ‘Removing the Shadow of Suspicion: The Effects of Apology Versus Denial for Repairing Competence- Versus Integrity-Based Trust Violations’, *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89, no. 1 (2004): pp. 104–18; at pp. 104–5. Similarly, we can say the psychological states that accompany the virtue of accountability

So why, under these circumstances, can Sonja not manifest the virtue of accountability in obeying the master if she thinks (albeit mistakenly) she is accountable to them?²⁵ Or, to ask a related question, why can the master not exploit Sonja's virtue of accountability but only her habitual respect for power? What is the difference here between a habitual respect for power and the virtue of accountability? The difference lies in that, to manifest the virtue of accountability, Sonja needs to be oriented towards a *legitimate* authority who guides her in a shared project *that is truly dedicated to her flourishing*. The virtue of accountability's status as a virtue, therefore, is determined by factors external to her. To embody a habitual respect for power, however, it does not matter whether the power is wielded by a legitimate authority committed to her flourishing. So, when Sonja transitions into a relationship of slavery, she may well carry her habitual respect for power into this relationship. However, external factors prevent her from being able to express the virtue of accountability in relationship to the master. For this reason, in relation to such external factors, the virtue of accountability may need support from the virtue of wisdom—that is, the wisdom to discern, in truth, whether someone has authority to hold one accountable. We shall return to this point in Section 3.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, accountability is a relational virtue that can only be expressed in relation to a *particular* accountor who has a *special* authority to serve an accountee's flourishing, relative to a shared project, which (when

are beneficial and yet can also make a person more exposed to exploitation. When an accountee embodies the virtue of accountability, they will be characterized by a trust and respect for an accountor whom they perceive to have authority that will help them to flourish in some way. If, therefore, an accountee misplaces their trust and respect in relation to a person who either does not have such authority or who will not use their authority to help the accountee, then they are vulnerable to being exploited. See Jeremy A. Yip and Maurice E. Schweitzer, 'Trust Promotes Unethical Behavior: Excessive Trust, Opportunistic Exploitation, and Strategic Exploitation', *Current Opinion in Psychology* 6 (2015): pp. 216–20. For research demonstrating how misplaced trust can be exploited, see Joyce Berg, John Dickhaut, and Kevin McCabe, 'Trust, Reciprocity, and Social History', *Games and Economic Behavior* 10, no. 1 (1995): pp. 122–42; Terry L. Boles, Rachel T. A. Croson, and J. Keith Murnighan, 'Deception and Retribution in Repeated Ultimatum Bargaining', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 83, no. 2 (2000): pp. 235–59; Deepak Malhotra, 'Trust and Reciprocity Decisions: The Differing Perspectives of Trustors and Trusted Parties', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 94, no. 2 (2004): pp. 61–73; Laura Kray, Jessica Kennedy, and Alex Bryan Van Zant, 'Not Competent Enough to Know the Difference? Gender Stereotypes about Women's Ease of Being Misled Predict Negotiator Deception', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 125, no. 2 (2014): pp. 61–72; Mara Olekalns, Christopher Horan, and Philip Smith, 'Maybe It's Right, Maybe It's Wrong: Structural and Social Determinants of Deception in Negotiation', *Journal of Business Ethics* 122 (2014): pp. 89–102.

²⁵ In a closely related discussion, Bruce Waller considers the example of Jamal 'the willing slave', who, as a result of an extended period of horrendous oppression, "accepts his fate," embraces his life of slavery, and loses any desire for freedom: now he wishes only to serve his master faithfully, is glad that he is a slave, and reflectively approves of his enslavement'. Under these circumstances, he notes that, according to Harry Frankfurt's view of freedom and responsibility, Jamal 'has free will and is morally responsible for his own slavery'. Waller argues, however, that the 'unwilling slave is not free, but the willing slave is even less so: in Simone de Beauvoir's phrase, the willing slave exemplifies "the most consummate and unacceptable form of oppression"'. Bruce N. Waller, *Against Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 60–1, citing Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 141.

appropriate) is informed by a *reciprocal relationship* between the accountor and the accountee. While there are some relational virtues a person can express in relationship to anyone (e.g. friendliness, compassion, and generosity), there are other relational virtues that can only be expressed in relation to a particular person who fulfils certain criteria (e.g. forgivingness can only truly be expressed in relationship to an offender, and gratitude can only truly be expressed in relationship to someone who has performed a kindness). Accountability is the latter kind of relational virtue. For a person to cultivate the virtue of accountability, the following three criteria must be fulfilled:

1. the accountor has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who the accountee is and should be in their role in a shared project;
2. the shared project is oriented towards an end(s) *of* and/or *for* the accountee; and
3. the accountor is oriented towards an end(s) *of* and/or *for* the accountee.

For an accountee to exhibit the virtue of accountability, it is not enough for them simply to believe these criteria have been fulfilled; they must also be met objectively. As such, I am here holding to an externalist account of the virtue of accountability, according to which its status as a virtue is determined by factors external to the agent. Theologically, this means these criteria must be fulfilled according to God's authority and creative purposes, which provide the one true basis for the authority, teleology, and flourishing that shapes our understanding of accountability.

3. The Possible Reasoning for Paul's and Aquinas's Attitudes towards Slavery

So, how might Paul and Aquinas respond to our reasons for why the relationship between an enslaved person and a master cannot be considered one of accountability? Given what I have said about their approach towards slavery, in their context, it would seem that neither of them would fully or, at least, consistently agree with our reasoning. They both accept narratives that recognize the legitimacy of the authority of masters over enslaved persons, relative to the shared project of slavery. While such narratives may have made sense to them relative to their respective contexts,²⁶ and while their responses may well have been the most pragmatic ones, this does not entail it is anachronistic to call such narratives into

²⁶ To reiterate, the slaveries of Paul's day were different from the slaveries of Aquinas's day. They were also very different, for example, from the slaveries of the antebellum South and the slaveries of our modern day. While it would be helpful to have a more nuanced discussion of slavery, relative to certain historical and geographical contexts, such a task is beyond the scope of this chapter.

question—assuming (1) that, objectively, slavery is always abhorrent, and (2) that the slaveries of their day meet our definition of slavery.

That said, it is not altogether clear which aspects of our reasoning they would reject, since they both also say things that could support our argument. They both believe God commands all humans to love and respect one another as persons of equal value and dignity; neither thinks God creates some persons specifically for slavery; and nor do they think slavery itself fulfils or serves ends that are essential to human flourishing—that it serves to fulfil God's purposes for humanity. Nonetheless, they still view slavery as permissible in their immediate contexts.

While it is hard to work out precisely why Paul saw slavery as permissible, there would seem to be at least two possible explanations as to why Paul took the approach that he did. The first explanation is simply that, when Paul uses the language of slavery, he is using it as a metaphor for discipleship, rather than referring to the exploitative institution of slavery that existed at the time.²⁷ For example, Paul refers to the members of the body of Christ as 'slaves to righteousness' (Rom. 6:19) who 'through love become slaves to one another' (Gal. 5:13).²⁸ Furthermore, he says that these members are to be 'slaves' to one another 'for Jesus's sake' (2 Cor. 4:5), in a way that, arguably, reflects their being 'slaves of Christ' (1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6).²⁹ It could be argued that this is what Paul has in mind when he tells enslaved persons to obey their 'earthly masters... just as you would obey Christ' (Eph. 6:5). So when Paul then tells masters to treat their enslaved persons in the way that enslaved persons treat their masters (Eph. 6:9), we could interpret Paul as saying that, within the body of Christ, the master should be enslaved to the enslaved person through love just as the enslaved person is enslaved to the master through love—thereby establishing an equality that would prevent the relationship of slavery from being one of exploitation.

While it would be right to read some passages in Paul's writings in this way, it is not clear we can make this argument with respect to all of Paul's references to slavery. It appears that, at least sometimes, Paul is not referring to slavery metaphorically and is referring to enslaved persons as they are defined according to the institution of slavery as it existed at the time. We see this, for example, when he tells 'all who are under the yoke of slavery [to] regard their masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed'

²⁷ I am grateful to Brian Brock for encouraging me to consider this point.

²⁸ A problem with this approach, as John Barclay notes, is that it is 'difficult to see how instructions to Christian brothers to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6. 2) or "be slaves to one another through love" (Gal 5. 14) could be applied in practice in the daily lives of masters and slaves'. Barclay, 'Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', p. 178. As Barclay concludes, 'because slavery (especially domestic slavery) is experienced in intimate and personal relationships, and because its practice inevitably involves basic inequalities, there must be some tension here between the Pauline ideals of brotherhood and the practical realities of slavery'. Barclay, 'Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', p. 182.

²⁹ The problem with this reference to 1 Cor. 7:22 is that in the very next verse Paul commands 'do not become slaves of human masters' (1 Cor. 7:23).

(1 Tim. 6:1). We also see this when Paul writes to Titus, ‘Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour’ (Titus 2:9).

The second possible explanation for Paul’s acceptance of slavery is that, out of a relative and pragmatic concern for peace, Paul was willing to accept certain aspects of the status quo to avoid inciting an uprising (which would certainly have been dangerous for the enslaved persons).³⁰ If this is correct, then Paul would have been committed to the pragmatic view that, relative to his context, the persistence of slavery was a cross worth carrying for the greater good of the peace and flourishing of society (which could derivatively be seen to contribute to the relative flourishing of enslaved persons as members of society).³¹ For this reason, Paul was understandably not willing to go so far as to issue an emancipation proclamation—indeed, he may not have been able to envision such a possibility at the time.

Aquinas’s reasoning is a bit clearer, at least at one point in his writings. For him, slavery is a punishment for sin.³² As such, while slavery is not a divinely ordained part of the natural order as God created it to be, he did see a place for it in the

³⁰ A number of scholars argue there are pragmatic reasons for Paul’s approach. For example, N. T. Wright notes, ‘if all Christians of Paul’s day were suddenly to release their slaves, it is by no means clear that the slaves themselves, or society in general, would benefit: a large body of people suddenly unemployed in the ancient world might not enjoy their freedom as much as they would imagine’. Why does Paul take this approach? Wright responds, ‘[Paul] of course knows that in principle it is better to be free than to be a slave. But, like Jesus, his way of changing the world is to plant a grain of mustard seed which, inconspicuous at first, grows into a spreading tree. And in the meantime... he teaches slaves and masters to treat themselves, and each other, as human beings’. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1986), pp. 169–70. Notably, however, there were some voices in antiquity, such as Gregory of Nyssa (albeit 300 years later), who did critique slavery as an institution. See Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Position in Late Antique Debates on Slavery and Poverty, and the Role of Asceticism’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5, no. 1 (2012): pp. 87–118; David Bentley Hart, ‘The “Whole Humanity”: Gregory of Nyssa’s Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): pp. 51–69.

Another reason to hesitate to defend Paul’s approach, as Douglas Campbell notes, is that sophisticated biblical scholars in the nineteenth-century United States Confederacy interpreted Paul’s words ‘to support the supposedly God-ordained institution of slavery’. Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God’s Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), p. 561; see also Wayne Meeks, ‘The “Haustafeln” and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge’, in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, ed. E. H. Lovering and J. L. Sumney (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 232–53.

³¹ To entertain such a utilitarian view, one would need to respond to R. M. Hare’s point that it is extremely difficult to see why slavery would be necessary to support the aggregate flourishing of society. He asks rhetorically, ‘What on earth are the slaves doing that could not be more efficiently done by paid labour?’ Hare, ‘What Is Wrong with Slavery?’, p. 110. However, as should be evident, I do not think slavery is only wrong for utilitarian reasons.

³² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.189.6. We can see quiet echoes of this view in the claims of the segregationist Ross Barnett that “God was the original segregationist” and “The Negro is different because God made him different to punish him.” Richard Pearson, ‘Segregationist Governor Ross Barnett Dies at 89’, *Washington Post*, 8 November 1987, cited in Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p. 40.

fallen world. Like Paul, Aquinas also considered the persistence of slavery as a part of the flourishing of society (including slaves) in the context of a fallen world.

So, both Paul and Aquinas seem to believe that slavery can be viewed as a shared project that can—for pragmatic reasons motivated by their respective contexts—serve the flourishing of the enslaved person. Therefore, rather than arguing for the abolition of slavery, they sought to reform it. What kind of reforms did they have in mind? The first thing to say about Paul, as Esau McCaulley points out, is that ‘Paul is trying to make pastoral sense of a difficult situation’.³³ Under these circumstances, Paul sought to help enslaved persons see that ‘even in slavery one has some ability to live in a way that testifies to their beliefs’.³⁴ Paul was also committed to bringing about reconciliation between slaves and masters, and, as N. T. Wright suggests, he may well have thought some enslaved persons would be better off participating in a reconciled relationship (of slavery) with their masters than being set free and sent away.³⁵ This approach is evident, for example, when Paul asks Philemon to treat Onesimus ‘no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother’ (Philem. 16), albeit on the understanding that Onesimus would maintain his legal status as a slave under Philemon.³⁶

As we considered in Section 1, Aquinas also believed that a relationship between a master and an enslaved person could be mutually beneficial. According to his medieval view of society, he saw a place for some inferior persons (that is, persons of lower status and intellectual ability) to play the role of enslaved persons, and for other superior persons (persons of higher status and intellectual ability) to play the role of masters. By assuming these roles, the lower and higher status members of society would complement one another in service to the flourishing of society. Furthermore, like Paul, Aquinas concurs with Aristotle’s view that enslaved persons and masters can be friends since, as he notes in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, friendship is a relationship between two persons whose association with one another is mutually advantageous.³⁷ This Aristotelian view would also come to be echoed in the pro-slavery tracts of the antebellum South:

³³ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 161.

³⁴ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 161.

³⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 12.

³⁶ On this qualification, see M. R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), p. 188. It is relevant to note here, as Nyasha Junior points out, that Paul’s letter to Philemon was ‘called the “Pauline Mandate” by pro-slavery advocates’ and cited numerous times ‘in debates regarding the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850’. Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 50.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, 1.4.11. We should also acknowledge here that, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that friendship is ideally between equals and thus undermined by inequality. Nonetheless, he still recognizes ‘another kind of friendship, namely, that which involves an inequality between the parties’, which would be the kind of friendship involved in slavery. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1158b.

Slavery identifies the interests of the rich and the poor, master and slave, and begets domestic affection on one side, and loyalty and respect on the other. . . . The Southerner is the negro's friend, his only friend. Let no intermeddling abolitionist, no refined philosophy, dissolve this friendship.³⁸

Given the dominance of slavery in Paul's and Aquinas's contexts, it is not hard to see how some of the narratives and philosophies that undergirded slavery would have impacted their thinking. Moreover, there were many situations in which a person could be seen to be better off, in certain respects, as an enslaved person than they would otherwise have been—for example, when slavery delivered persons from starvation, gave them shelter, and perhaps even gave them work they found fulfilling. As such, we should hesitate to adopt a condescending or morally superior attitude to Paul and Aquinas and must be clear that our questioning comes from a position of privilege—in my case, as a white man in a modern Western liberal democracy where abolition is all too easy to imagine. Nonetheless, whatever contextual reasons there may have been for some people to accept slavery, we also cannot evade the fact that slavery is, at its core, exploitative. Therefore, we would fall short if we simply sought to reform it rather than to abolish it. Indeed, it would seem that Paul's and Aquinas's conviction that a master and an enslaved person can experience a loving friendship invites the conclusion that enslaved persons should be manumitted and given the opportunity to participate in a free and egalitarian working relationship.

One of the key things we learn from Paul's and Aquinas's approach to slavery is just how easy it is for false narratives to take hold of society in a way that allows relationships of exploitation to be treated as relationships of accountability. The way to address this problem is by cultivating a practical wisdom that enables persons to be better judges of authority. I shall now elaborate briefly on the role practical wisdom, when grounded in a true narrative, can play in enabling us to distinguish between accountability and exploitation.

4. Wisely Interpreting Authority

Aristotle defines practical wisdom or *phronesis* as a 'true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man'—that is,

³⁸ G. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1854), pp. 43, 95, quoted by Felicia Pratto and Angela Walker, 'Dominance in Disguise: Power, Beneficence, and Exploitation in Personal Relationships', in *The Use and Abuse of Power*, ed. Annette Lee-Chai and John Bargh (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), p. 94; see also Robert Jones's discussion of 'Rev. Basil Manly Sr. and the Compatibility of Slavery and the White Christian Worldview', in Jones, *White Too Long*, pp. 81–4. For a helpful discussion of white supremacist readings of Paul in comparison to the African American 'counterreception' of Paul, see Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*.

things that either serve or undermine true human flourishing.³⁹ It is by way of practical wisdom that a person is able to make good judgements about how and when to respond ‘to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way’.⁴⁰ This view of practical wisdom was later developed theologically by Aquinas in his account of prudence, which he defines as ‘wisdom concerning human affairs’ or ‘right reason with respect to action’.⁴¹ For Aquinas, as noted earlier, practical wisdom depends on the Holy Spirit directing humans in the flourishing for which God creates them, as revealed in sacred Scripture. In holding this view, Aquinas echoes Paul’s view that, to think the things of the Spirit, we need to live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:5) and be guided in the obedience of faith by the revelation made known through Scripture (Rom. 16:26). It is by the power of the Spirit that God’s law is written on human hearts and, therefore, proper moral judgement awakened and inspired—judgement that tracks the one true narrative of creation. This judgement is also informed more concretely by the words of Scripture as they are read and interpreted prayerfully within the church and through the history of theology that emerges from the church’s prayerful reflection on Scripture.⁴² Furthermore, when a firm basis in faith is established, such judgement can also be informed by scientists, historians, philosophers, and many others.

When it comes to the virtue of accountability specifically, practical wisdom guides a person in judging if, when, why, and how they should be accountable to a particular person—that is, whether a particular person has the legitimate authority required of an accountant. This wisdom is not only critical for helping accountees to recognize legitimate authority—so that they can know when to enact the virtue of accountability—but important also for guiding accountors to know what it truly means to enact authority.

That Paul and Aquinas both knew what is needed to guide virtuous practice before God, and were both committed to fulfilling these requirements, raises the

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b5.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a27–8.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.47.2, 4.

⁴² Kevin Vanhoozer argues that ‘Scripture, inasmuch as it trains the imagination and generates interpretative frameworks for describing experience, is the central means for cultivating Christian phronesis’. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), p. 349. While we can sympathize with Vanhoozer on this point, we should avoid emphasizing the role of Scripture over and above the role of the church and the Holy Spirit. The ambiguities of Scripture make it easy for readers to (mis)interpret it in a way that can support unjust causes—as we saw in our discussion of slavery. As such, we need to recognize that the work of the Spirit and the church community are every bit as central to Christian phronesis. It was certainly not Scripture alone that led the church to support the abolition of slavery—many slaveowners were able to employ valid readings of Scripture to support their cause. It was through the Spirit working in and through the church community that Christians progressed to lead the charge in the abolition of slavery. Given Vanhoozer’s own emphasis on the fundamental role of the Spirit in shaping human wisdom, there is reason to think he might agree with this qualification; see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 292; *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 407–31.

question as to how they could accept the notion that enslaved persons are accountable to their masters. Again, the simplest answer to this question is that, on the issue of slavery, there had yet to be a revolution, which meant, again, that their imaginations, concerns, and/or ambitions were limited by their respective contexts. Abolition may simply not have been on their particular radars; they were having to think pragmatically about slavery in the context of a very different world, in societies shaped by very different narratives. Their occasional willingness to accept the authority of masters over enslaved persons, despite their dedication to cultivating practical wisdom, is a further testament to the immense power of false narratives. It points to the fact that, in this fallen world, the creaturely pursuit of practical wisdom is always constrained by the sinful narratives that afflict the contexts in which our theological reasoning emerges.

So how did the church's later attitude towards slavery manage to evolve? The simple answer is that, over time, the church's understanding developed on this issue through its ongoing commitment to the praxis that generates practical wisdom. That this development took time is a sign that the church's pursuit of practical wisdom can be both slow and wavering as it battles against the prevailing imaginations of sinful cultures. The other point to reiterate here, however, is that while the practical wisdom of Paul and Aquinas may have led them to be more accepting of slavery, it also led them to produce arguments that contributed greatly to the trajectory that eventually led to the abolition of slavery—for example, when they argued for the equal dignity of all humans and the importance of mutual love between all humans.

5. The Concept of Exploitation

Other than seeking to cultivate practical wisdom in the way I have broadly prescribed, is there anything more that can be done to avoid confusion about accountability? It would certainly help to offer a clearer conceptual distinction between accountability and exploitation. This would make it easier to avoid confusing the two in a way that, as we have considered, can facilitate exploitation. I propose, therefore, the following definition of exploitation, using wording that correlates with that for our definition of accountability:

Exploitation (between persons) is the condition of someone (the exploitee) interacting with another (the exploiter) who uses their power to define, utilize, and/or instrumentalize the exploitee in a shared project that unfairly takes advantage of them; a project that characterizes the relationship between the exploiter and the exploitee and their roles within it, but which is specifically

oriented towards a goal(s) of and/or for the exploiter, and which benefits the exploiter at the expense of the exploitee's flourishing.⁴³

While there is some debate as to what precisely is wrong with exploitation,⁴⁴ it has one flaw that is especially relevant to our discussion: exploitation is contrary to a relationship of love and all that it entails; it is spiteful to exploit one's neighbour. In a relationship of exploitation, a person uses their power to take advantage of someone vulnerable in a way that is unjust and demeaning, which entails they flourish less than they would otherwise if the relationship were just.⁴⁵ In making this point, I acknowledge there are circumstances in which exploitation can benefit the exploitee—for example, when someone manages to provide for themselves by working in a sweatshop. If, however, such circumstances are exploitative, then the limited benefits an exploitee receives will not balance out the injustice that characterizes the way in which an exploiter takes advantage of them. That is, the exploiter benefits at the cost of the exploitee not receiving their due.

Another controversial point to add here is that it is flawed for an exploitee to embrace their exploitation as a positive thing (rather than endure it as a negative thing) in a way that actively facilitates the exploiter's moral decline.⁴⁶ This is because exploitation is not only detrimental to an exploitee but also to an exploiter insofar as it erodes their moral flourishing; it supports their unjust role as an exploiter. As such, the disposition of an exploitee to embrace (again, rather than endure) their exploitation could be referred to as the vice of exploitability⁴⁷—a vice that is, in some respects, a correlate of the virtue of accountability.⁴⁸ That is, an exploitee is characterized by the vice of exploitability when they welcome an

⁴³ Our view of exploitation echoes Robert Mayer's view which stresses that exploitation involves unjust gain at the expense of another. Robert Mayer, 'What's Wrong with Exploitation?', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2007): pp. 138–50.

⁴⁴ For alternative perspectives, see Robert Goodin, 'Exploiting a Situation and Exploiting a Person', in *Modern Theories of Exploitation*, ed. Andrew Reeve (London: Sage, 1987), pp. 166–97. Goodin focuses on arguing that exploitation is wrong because of the way it targets the vulnerable. Or see Justin Schwartz, 'What's Wrong with Exploitation?', *Noûs* 29 (1995): pp. 158–87. Schwartz argues that exploitation is wrong because it is coercive.

⁴⁵ As Matt Zwolinski and Alan Wertheimer write, exploitation 'makes its victim worse off than she should have been had she been treated fairly'. Matt Zwolinski and Alan Wertheimer, 'Exploitation', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017), ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/exploitation/>. See also Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 22–3.

⁴⁶ As Linda Woodhead notes, 'no-one's well-being is served by [Christians] letting their neighbour perform acts of violence and violation on others'. She makes this point in response to her example of wives who 'feel they ought to let their husbands beat or sexually assault them, because those husbands seem to need to do so very much. The women feel that true Christian love requires this submission of them.' Linda Woodhead, 'Love and Justice,' *Studies in Christian Ethics* 5, no. 1 (1992): pp. 41–61; quotation from p. 57.

⁴⁷ This vice could also perhaps be construed as the vice of servility; they are at least closely connected. However, for the sake of connecting the vice with the condition, and to avoid expanding our discussion further, it is helpful here simply to refer to the vice of exploitability.

⁴⁸ For another discussion of the vices that correlate to the virtue of accountability, see C. Stephen Evans, *Living Accountably* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 68–91.

exploiter's account of them as an instrument to be used for the exploiter's own ends, at the expense of the exploitee's flourishing and, indeed, the exploiter's moral flourishing. Rather than being grounded in practical wisdom, the person who expresses the vice of exploitability is characterized by naïveté. As Jeremy Yip and Maurice Schweitzer explain:

Naïve individuals are especially likely to be exploited for two reasons. First, naïve individuals trust others too readily. Second, naïve individuals make it easier for exploiters to justify their behavior. Justification is a key antecedent to engaging in unethical behavior, and people find it easier to justify their exploitive behavior if they believe that their targets are naïve.⁴⁹

It is incredibly easy to be naïve in this respect. Deceived by the sinful structures of this world, each of us is characterized by a naïveté that can expose us to exploitation. One of the difficulties here is that, in order to become resistant to such naïveté, one would probably need to become flawed in other ways—for example, by becoming untrusting. Furthermore, it is especially difficult to become resistant to exploitation without also becoming resistant to cultivating the virtue of accountability. Therefore, to form the virtue of accountability, a person will need to resist the naïveté that undergirds exploitability, while also employing practical wisdom to recognize and trust those authorities that will help them flourish.

It may come across as contentious to propose a vice called exploitability; it may seem like a cruel act of 'victim blaming' to condemn the vices of a person who embraces exploitation.⁵⁰ However, it may be less contentious if we frame this point by noting there is practical wisdom and (thus) virtue in not being disposed to participate willingly in structures of exploitation. This is why, for example, parents encourage their children not to talk to strangers, and may well discipline their children if they catch them doing so. It is also why Scripture frequently warns readers about apparent authorities who lead people astray—'authorities' such as false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing, and those who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ.⁵¹ Practically speaking, the valuable reason to identify the vice of exploitability is not to condemn those who are exploited but to affirm that a predisposition to embracing exploitation is not good; instead, there is virtue in questioning and resisting those who falsely claim authority. This means the person

⁴⁹ Yip and Schweitzer, 'Trust Promotes Unethical Behavior', p. 217.

⁵⁰ By focusing on the need for victims to become wiser to avoid exploitation, there is a risk that we become overly concerned with addressing the weaknesses in the victim rather than thinking about the structural injustices that facilitate exploitation. For further discussion of this point in relation to poverty, see J. Shaw, K. C. McLean, B. Taylor, K. Swartout, and K. Querna, 'Beyond Resilience: Why We Need to Look at Systems Too', *Psychology of Violence* 6 (2016): pp. 34–41.

⁵¹ e.g. Jer. 50:6; Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29–31; 2 Cor. 11:13; 2 Tim. 3:5–6; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

who embodies the virtue of accountability should not only be characterized by a humble respect for authority but also by a willingness to question authority in a way that prevents them from becoming vulnerable to exploitation. One of the strengths of such questioning is that it encourages the reciprocity critical to many relationships of accountability.

So, what question should an accountee/exploitee ask themselves when seeking to discern whether a relationship is one of accountability or exploitation (and therefore whether they are being addressed as an accountee or an exploitee)? The primary question to ask is whether an accountor/exploiter is primarily oriented towards the accountee's/exploitee's goal(s) or towards the accountor's/exploiter's goal(s) at the expense of the accountee's/exploitee's flourishing (i.e. their flourishing if they were treated fairly).⁵² If the former is the case, then the relationship is one of accountability; if the latter is the case, then it is one of exploitation.

There is a theological concern that might arise here. Could it not be suggested that Jesus exhibited the vice of exploitability when he allowed others to exploit him in a way that facilitated their moral decline?⁵³ Could Jesus not have done more to challenge the abuse he received from illegitimate authorities? Also, does the apostle Paul not exhibit the vice of exploitability when he is content with insults, hardships, and persecution (2 Cor. 12:10)? And does Christ's call to carry one's cross (Luke 14:27) not invite persons to embrace this vice? To address these questions, we must re-emphasize that the vice of exploitability involves a person *embracing* rather than *enduring* their exploitation. Despite Paul's rhetorical language in 2 Corinthians 12, it would be hard to argue that Jesus, Paul, or any follower of Christ should (or did) embrace the ways in which exploiters disobeyed God's command to love them, and that they welcomed the exploiters' accounts of them as objects to be exploited. If this were the approach of Jesus and his followers, it is unclear why they spent so much time questioning unjust powers. It is true they would often submit to unjust authorities. However, when they did so, they did so as participants in a movement that was radically opposed to the exploitative powers of this world; they were not seeking to contribute to the advancement of such powers but to be their means of transformation. When we are clear about this point, we can also be clear that following Christ does not invite us to embrace the crosses of exploitation that some of us bear, but to participate in a movement that seeks to deliver exploitees from their suffering and also speak out against exploiters in the face of their own moral decline.

⁵² As Felicia Pratto and Angela Walker argue, one of the main ways to avoid exploitation is to ensure the relationship between the two parties is characterized by a reciprocity that creates a resistance to power imbalances that provide support for abuse. This requires a commitment on the part of the accountor to being attentive to the subjective needs of the accountee. It will involve being 'very strict in not allowing dominants to put their needs ahead of subordinates', as well as a commitment to ensuring that 'exploitation and abuse should not be allowed on the ground that they are temporary'. Pratto and Walker, 'Dominance in Disguise', p. 110.

⁵³ I am grateful to Daniel Spencer for pushing me to address this question.

While this brief analysis of exploitation may go some way to helping us distinguish between accountability and exploitation, so much still depends on us having a more informed practical wisdom to interpret rightly the nature of the authority, roles, flourishing, and shared projects that characterize relationships of accountability.⁵⁴ As such, an analytic distinction between these two concepts can only do so much to prevent us from confusing them. As Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood note, ‘deft conceptual analysis can only help those who have been brought up in a way that predisposes them to make proper use of [conceptual analysis]’.⁵⁵ Therefore, the rest of this book will be given to developing a theological foundation for thinking more substantively about the nature of accountability. If we understand that God is the one true source of all authority, then coming to terms with God’s narrative is essential for properly understanding the condition and virtue of accountability. For accountability to be truly characterized by wisdom, we must learn what it means to know and treat one another as characters in God’s narrative of creation; a narrative defined by the one in, through, and for whom all things were created, Jesus Christ.

6. Conclusion

The aim of Chapters 3 and 4 has been to present a view of accountability as a virtue based on our definition of the condition of accountability. After offering an introductory account of this virtue in Chapter 3, we turned to consider the character of accountability as a relational virtue. We then sought to develop a clearer understanding of what makes accountability a distinctive virtue by differentiating it from the closely related virtue of obedience. In this chapter, we have considered how we might think about the virtue of accountability in a way that would prevent it from exposing persons to exploitation. This led us to conclude by distinguishing the virtue of accountability from what we referred to as the vice of exploitability.

As noted in the opening to Chapter 3, our basis for thinking about accountability as a virtue is that God creates human beings to flourish *in and through* embracing God’s authority over who they are, and, furthermore, *in and through* embracing the God-given authority of other human beings. Accordingly, while our opening four chapters have sought to think more broadly about the nature of accountability, our thinking about accountability has been informed throughout

⁵⁴ Robert Mayer makes a similar observation when he notes that our understanding of exploitation will depend on our assumptions about what is fair or just. Mayer points out, for example, that ‘Aristotle did not view slavery as exploitative because he did not think slaves suffered a loss from the standpoint of fairness. There was no wrongful gain.’ Mayer, ‘What’s Wrong with Exploitation?’, p. 144.

⁵⁵ Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 309.

by an understanding of the purposes for which God creates human beings. However, in Part II of this book, we shall engage more deeply with this underlying theology and be more explicit about the ways in which it should shape our thinking about accountability. In addition to thinking more carefully about the underlying foundation of our approach, it will also enable us to think more substantively about the nature of accountability and how we might apply this concept theologically.

PART II

A THEOLOGY OF
ACCOUNTABILITY

The Story of Creation and the Covenant of Accountability

The task of Part I was to propose, develop, and analyse the concept of accountability, and consider why accountability plays a distinctively valuable role in human life. In arguing for the virtuous nature of accountability, a case was also made that the value of accountability is not simply utilitarian; accountability is not only valuable because it is a useful means for helping persons to achieve certain ends. Rather, accountability is valuable because it is an essential feature of the lives we were created to live before God. That is, God creates us to be accountable to God and, derivatively, to be accountable to one another. To cast this in narrative terms, God creates us to exist primarily as characters in God's story of the world and, derivatively, in the (true) stories we come to learn about ourselves from others. While God is the ultimate author of the story of creation, God also reveals God's story through a diversity of humans who are given authority to represent God's story to the world in a variety of particular ways. The focus of the second part of this book will be to paint a picture of what it means more specifically to be accountable to God as characters in God's narrative.

Before going any further, it will be helpful to clarify how precisely we shall be thinking about narrative in our discussion of accountability. In his recent article on 'The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self', Michael Rea helpfully describes a narrative as:

a narratively structured representation of a state of affairs or a sequence of events. A narratively structured representation is a representation whose content is unified by an interpretation (tacit or explicit) that orders the various components of the representation in such a way as to highlight their significance in relation to some particular collection of interests (often but not always the interests of the storyteller, the protagonist, or the expected audience), or to identify causal or explanatory relations among those components that are salient in relation to some collection of interests, or both.¹

¹ Michael Rea, 'The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2022): pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.28>; quotation from p. 2. As Rea acknowledges, his use of narrative here aligns with Marya Schechtman's view in *The Constitution of Selves*

For the purposes of this book, we shall adopt this view of narrative. That said, when thinking specifically of the narrative that God has in mind for creation, there are a couple of ways to tweak Rea's view of a 'narratively structured representation' to characterize it as follows:

a representation whose content is unified by *the divine determination/decision* that orders the various components of the representation in such a way as to *determine* their significance in relation to *God's creative purposes (which are always in the interests* of the storyteller, the protagonist, and the expected audience), or to identify causal or explanatory relations among those components that are salient in relation to *the* collection of interests, or both.

In this chapter, we shall focus on the core structure of the relationship of accountability between God and humans—as author and characters—by thinking, first, about the nature of theological narrative and then, second, about the relationship between creation and covenant. As we shall consider, the reason these three themes—accountability to God, narrative, and covenant—are closely intertwined is that the story of creation does not simply begin with its physical actualization but with God authoring a covenant narrative that gives creation its meaning and purpose. God does not first create a world and only later decide what to do with it; creation and providence do not involve God working things out as God goes along. Rather, God elects to create a world that will be characterized by a history of covenant relationship between God and humanity. To put this in the terms of this book, God elects us to participate in a history of accountability to God in which God spells out the obligations that come with fulfilling the roles for which God creates us—roles that are both life-giving and essential to our flourishing. In this respect, God creates us to be God's people, to belong to God, and, therefore, to be defined and judged according to God's covenantal account of who we are and who we should be.

So how precisely will we be thinking about the concept of covenant? There are many ways to think about this concept, and we find a variety of uses of the word 'covenant' (Hebrew *berit*) throughout Scripture, each of which needs to be construed relative to a particular context. So, coming up with a precise theological definition of covenant is a precarious enterprise. We therefore need to be

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 97. Another helpful account of narrative is offered by Helena de Bres in her article 'Narrative and Meaning in Life', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15, no. 5 (2018): pp. 545–71. Here de Bres highlights the key features of a narrative as follows: '[Narratives] have a *diachronic* character: they present the unfolding of events over time (though not necessarily in strict temporal order). They display *connections* (usually, but not always, causal) between the events depicted. Their parts exhibit a certain *continuity* or *coherence* (so that any "micro narratives" present are integrated into a broader narrative). They focus on *agency*: the motivations of agents and the nature and consequences of their actions. And they aim to communicate *significance*: they offer an interpretation of events, from a certain perspective, designed to elicit understanding in an audience' (p. 547).

completely transparent about the fact that our working view of covenant will not be broadly representative of how this word is used in both Scripture and throughout Jewish and Christian traditions. Nonetheless, there is a way to think about God's covenant with humanity that can be seen to underlie many of the ways in which Scripture portrays God's relationship with God's people—even if not uniformly. That is, God's covenant relationship with humanity can be represented by what Rolf Rendtorff refers to as a covenant formula: “I am your God [i.e. your divine author] and you are my people [i.e. characters in my story].”² Before the word ‘covenant’ (*berit*) even appears in Scripture, we can see the relationship presupposed by this formula depicted in the opening chapters of Genesis. We see it, for example, when God determines to create humankind in God's image (Gen. 1:26–7); when God tells humanity about their vocation (to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over every living thing; Gen. 1:28); when God announces everything is good according to how God made it (Gen. 1:31); when God tells Adam what he can and cannot eat, should he want to live (Gen. 2:16–17); when God determines it is not good for man to be alone and so created a woman (Gen. 2:18); and when Adam and Eve fall by resisting their created purpose to be God's people (Gen. 3). In these determinations, God establishes and formalizes a covenant relationship with humans and spells out their obligations as a people accountable to God.³ Within this relationship, God's actions correspond to God's commitment to helping humans become all that God creates them to be, to flourish as God creates them to flourish.

But before we think specifically about the accountability of God's people, this chapter will begin with a prolegomenal reflection on what it means to treat theological narrative as a basis for the theological task. The reason for starting with this reflection is that this part of the book will not only present a view of accountability to God but will also proceed on the assumption that we *are* accountable to God. In narrative terms, we shall take a decisively theological approach by thinking about what it means to be a character in God's story on the theological assumption we are precisely that. This means we shall not speculate over fundamental questions about why God authors and creates such a story, nor will we engage in an apologetic defence of this assumption. To help us come to terms with this dogmatic approach, the opening section will elaborate on some of the implications of viewing God as the ultimate author and storyteller—that is, the author and storyteller of the Christian story to which the church bears witness.

² Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 3.

³ Our understanding of covenant here echoes Jon Levenson's general definition of covenant as ‘a kind of treaty’ that ‘establishes or formalizes a relationship and spells out the obligations’. Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 5.

Following our overview of theological narrative, we shall turn to consider the nature of the relationship between creation and covenant and discuss how this might inform our thinking about accountability to God. This will involve a discussion of three key features of God's covenant relationship with us: (1) the relationship between covenant and promise; (2) the moral framework of covenant; and (3) the particular place of covenant history. I then seek to offer a precise account of a way in which we might think generally about the relationship between creation and covenant by drawing on Karl Barth's view of this matter. Finally, I end by offering a few clarificatory remarks about the (extrabiblical) metaphysics that undergirds our covenant theology of accountability.

1. Theological Narrative

Let us now turn to consider how we might go about embracing a distinctively theological narrative and why we should do so. I shall then present an overview of the core scriptural narrative that I shall adopt for the sake of the second half of this book. While there will undoubtedly be readers who disagree with the narrative I adopt, such readers will still be able to read this part of the book as providing an example of how a particular narrative framework can shape how we understand what it means to be accountable to God.

1.1 What is our basis for embracing a theological narrative?

One of the first points to make about telling a theological story is that it is primarily a descriptive rather than creative task. To be a Christian disciple is to be a learner—the literal meaning of the Greek term for disciple, *mathētēs*. More precisely, the task of the theologian is to learn about and witness to the story that God reveals about who God is in relationship to creation and what creation is before God. There is no possibility of escaping or transcending our storied situation, so we must take up the task of theology by learning to describe the story in which God places us. The more a theologian deviates from being descriptive—by becoming overly creative or speculative—the greater the danger they will veer off into their own creative fictions wherein they try to define both God and humanity as characters in those fictions.⁴ To put it more colloquially, they will start making stuff up.

⁴ I am not here suggesting that speculation has no place in theology but simply that there are good reasons to avoid becoming overly speculative. The question as to what counts as 'overly speculative' is beyond the scope of this book, so I shall leave it up to readers to make their own judgement on this.

So, how can theologians seek to give the best descriptive account of God's story? In the earliest days of theological discernment, this was simply a prophetic task based on the divine inspiration that guided theologians in their attempts to depict theological truths. The prophecies that were accepted in the earliest stages of theological learning gave rise to resources such as Scripture, creeds, and confessions that provide theologians with more concrete support for their theological discernment. To guide the interpretation of these diverse resources, the church has traditionally read them within an interpretative framework that prioritizes the clearest and most persuasive message that God speaks to the world: Jesus Christ, God's Word become flesh (John 1:14), the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth is given (Matt. 28:18), the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 21:6). By so doing, the church follows the apostle Paul's approach of seeking to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5) and thereby develops a theology that reflects its communal life as the body of Christ. It is according to this identity that the church stands as the foremost authoritative community in, through, and with which to learn God's story. To help the church fulfil this role, the church prays constantly for the Holy Spirit to guide its interpretation of God's story and shape its understanding of what it means to participate in this story.

There is much more to say (and to debate) about how theologians come to learn and interpret God's story. Furthermore, different theological attempts to discern God's story have generated a vast array of competing stories, due to there being so much room for interpretation—not only of the story itself, but also of how best to approach it. Nevertheless, Christian theologians have generally been united by the conviction that discerning God's story is fundamental for understanding the purpose of creation and our place within it, at least to some extent. That is, theologians generally recognize that by investigating God's story, we can discern the suppositions needed to interpret the meaning or purpose of creation in every other sense—scientifically, metaphysically, socially, morally, and so on. From a theological perspective, to try to tell a purely secular story about what it means to be human—that is, in merely scientific, metaphysical, social, and/or moralistic terms—will always be overly reductive and incomplete. This is because God is an agent in the history narrated, and also because God gives the natural order a meaning (i.e. a purpose or teleology) far greater and truer than the meaning we might try to surmise on the basis of secular observations and reflections. Ultimately, it is not nature itself that defines what is natural—that somehow authors the 'book of nature'—but God. Accordingly, the task of the theologian is to try to discern the true meaning of all things according to God, who not only gives all things their meaning, but who also guides us and sustains us in our attempts to discover that meaning. This does not mean that science, metaphysics, and culture cannot contribute to the task of theology. What it means, rather, is that when these areas inform our understanding of God's story, we must ensure

that such information can then be construed within the context of the one story that defines all other stories.

At this point, there is an objection that may arise, particularly from those who think that theological stories are especially dubious or fanciful—a concern that echoes one of Galen Strawson's concerns about narrative accounts of the world.⁵ If one assumes the truth of a theological story—or any grand story for that matter, theological or not—is there not a risk of giving too much weight to a false narrative that will draw us into a life of self-deception? There are many reasons to take this question seriously. As we considered in the first part of this book, theological stories have been and continue to be used to generate and support oppression, marginalization, and hostility. If we are to reject stories with these consequences as false, then we will be doing so on the belief they are precipitated by a self-deception grounded in a religious fiction. So how might we respond to this concern? Let us briefly consider two points.

First, any concern that someone's narrative commitments might be deceptive will itself be motivated by an attachment to some underlying narrative(s) about what is (im)proper for us, which is no less open to deception. The fact that our concerns are motivated by narrative commitments, often unconsciously, leads to a common problem. When two persons find themselves engaged in a debate that results from a commitment to competing narratives, they will often arrive at something of an impasse. To move beyond this impasse, they cannot simply set aside their narrative commitments *per se*—again, any motivation to do so will be driven by a narrative view of the (im)propriety of certain narrative commitments.⁶ Rather, one or both parties will need to adjust their narrative commitments to allow for agreement on whatever issue they are debating. Ideally, these adjustments will bring both parties closer to recognizing a true narrative. As Anthony Rudd notes:

The only way in which we can see that people are self-deceived is to compare the stories they tell with more truthful ones. Of course there are bad, out-dated, self-deceived or just plain inaccurate narratives; but the only conclusion we should draw from that is that we need to tell better ones. There is no possibility of getting

⁵ As Strawson writes, 'the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature ... the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being'. Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* 17, no. 4 (2004): pp. 428–52; quotation from p. 447. In making this claim, Strawson appears to be committed to a narrative in which humans should strive to be characters in a story in which they should seek to develop 'a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature'. According to this story, certain forms of narrative self-understanding are a hindrance to achieving the goals that define his narrative.

⁶ To clarify further, such a motivation will be based on a narrative that a person believes about who they should be and become in relation to certain narrative commitments: i.e. whether they should be and become someone who embraces such commitments or rejects them.

away from narrative form altogether. It is actually the anti-narrativists who seem, at least implicitly, to appeal to an Archimedean point, a God's-Eye view, from which we could contrast the narratives we tell with The Plain Facts and thus decide if our narratives are distorted. But there is no such point, and no such Facts.⁷

The second point to make here is that, as a work of Christian theology, this book sees it as a requirement to adopt a narrative realism that is beholden to the following premises: God exists; God creates and defines the historical world as a narrative; and we have access to authoritative resources with which we can learn about God's narrative (e.g. Scripture). While it would be wrong for us to think we can adopt a God's-eye view of the world to discern 'The Plain Facts' (the objective truths) of God's story (from beyond our location within the narrative of history), we can believe God's revelation provides us with access to a story that, to some extent, bears witness to God's view of the world. With Scripture in hand, for example, we can recognize we have a divinely inspired resource with which God helps us to distinguish between true and false stories. At the same time, we also need to be aware that resources such as Scripture only provide us with limited and fragmentary access to God's story of creation and of who we are within it. Scripture has been crafted, put together, transmitted, translated, and interpreted by humans who were and are limited by their finite perspectives, and whose thoughts were and are shaped (and perhaps distorted) by the many other narratives that shape the sociohistorical contexts in and through which Scripture emerged.

Despite our limitations, there is still a great deal we can learn about God's story of creation, and, therefore, about our accountability to God. Again, to do so, we must attend to the narration of the divine author. Theologically speaking, it is futile to try to tell a true and meaningful story about the fundamental nature of creation (and our place within it) that does not ultimately refer to God. Moreover, any story that tries to compete with the theological story will itself need to be viewed as deceptive. Of course, many secular thinkers consider it audacious, even ludicrous, to ground our understanding of the cosmos, and of our place within it, in a story authored and told by a divine author. Yet, from a Christian theological perspective, it is a whole lot more audacious, almost comically so, for us to make up our own stories and then, on the basis of such stories, question both the existence of God and also our createdness—like clay that questions the one who fashions it (Isa. 45:9; Rom. 9:20–1).⁸ But such circumstances are also tragic; they

⁷ Anthony Rudd, 'In Defence of Narrative', *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2007): pp. 60–75; quotation from p. 66.

⁸ For an example of a secular thinker who does this in a way that correlates with much of our discussion of accountability to God, see Dominic Johnson's *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

are prefigured by the original tragedy disclosed in the biblical witness. As we consider in Chapter 6, the story of the Fall of Humanity is the story of people seeking to become like God by trying to become the authors of their own stories—stories that generate the most horrendous evils and suffering, stories which can only ever end in death. So, from a theological perspective, to proclaim that God’s story is the one true narrative—the narrative that defines all other narratives—is not a brazen act of pride but a humble act of reverence. It is profoundly more prideful to embrace our own fictions as ultimate narratives; indeed, as we discuss in Chapter 6, this is characteristic of the pride that comes before the Fall.

1.2 How is a theological story distinct from a secular story?

Having offered a basic account of what it means to embrace a theological story, let us now try to become clearer about how a theological approach to narrative differs from a secular approach—that is, from an approach that disregards God. It is important to clarify this because of the strong tendency to allow secular narratives to distort our interpretation of God’s story. For example, this can happen (1) when we try to defend or sell a theological story to a sceptic according to secular criteria, as can happen in theodicies that seek to justify God according to our stories about what we think God should and should not do. It can happen (2) when we try to make sense of a theological story in relation to stories developed by way of (or, at least, influenced by) secular methodologies such as methodological atheism/agnosticism/naturalism or certain secular historical–critical approaches. Or it can happen (3) when the narratives we develop instinctively (or naturally, as some might say) put pressure on our theological interpretation, such as those narratives shaped by our basic desires to fight, flee, feed, fit in, and breed. We will not become distracted here by making accusations about who might be guilty of secularizing God’s story—and, as we consider in Chapter 6, there are ways in which we are all guilty of this. What I will add here is that when this happens, there is a sense in which we end up trying to hold God to account as a character in our own fictions—that is, by judging God on the basis of secular concerns that distort and distract from God’s story.

So how do secular stories differ from theological stories about who we are? First, to make an obvious point, secular authors pay no conscious attention to God’s revelation—even if they cannot escape the ways in which divine revelation shapes the contexts that inform secular stories.⁹ This means, for example, that if a secular story makes any reference to ‘God’, ‘God’ will be treated as a cultural artefact that some religious believers construct for themselves to make sense of the

⁹ For an example of how theological narratives shape secular narratives, see Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

world. On a secular account, God is essentially a character in a human story rather than its author and narrator. So, instead of trying to work out who we are according to God's story, secular thinkers try to make sense of our identities according to whatever stories they can construct for themselves. For example, according to Marya Schechtman's narrative view, 'a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life'.¹⁰ And for those who are not able to narrate their own lives ('e.g., infants and those with cognitive difficulties'), they 'can be given an identity through narratives created by [human] others'.¹¹

Schechtman's latter point here connects to another difference between theological and secular stories. Unlike God's story, which is authored solely by God, a secular story is always informed and shaped by factors external to the author(s), especially stories they pick up from others. Accordingly, in Alasdair MacIntyre's reflection on the narrative view of the self, he writes:

we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. . . . We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.¹²

While MacIntyre recognizes we cannot escape the narratives of others, he also recognizes 'it is necessary, if life is to be meaningful, for us to be in possession of ourselves and not merely to be the creations of other people's projects, intentions and desires'.¹³ If we are to play an intentional role in shaping our lives, then we need to be able to embrace our own narrative(s) with which our lives can take on goals and a purposiveness that will motivate our life decisions. On a secular view of the world, this does not mean my version of my story will be recognized as the definitive way of rendering my life story. For example, while I may think of myself as the hero of my story (aiming at what I think is right), I may be able to recognize that there are intelligible reasons why someone else might view me as a villain according to their story (aiming at what they think is wrong). On a secular account, whether I am a hero or a villain will depend upon whoever's underlying

¹⁰ Schechtman, *Constitution of Selves*, p. 93. In a later book, Schechtman clarifies 'that "having an autobiographical narrative" does not amount to consciously retelling one's life story always (or ever) to oneself or to anyone else. The sense in which we have autobiographical narratives on this account is cashed out mostly in terms of the way in which an implicit understanding of the ongoing course of our lives influences our experience and deliberation.' Schechtman, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 101.

¹¹ Schechtman, *Staying Alive*, p. 104.

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 213.

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 104.

story is used to make sense of my role in the world. Theologically speaking, however, my status as a hero or a villain—a saint or a sinner—always depends on who I am before God, as a character in God’s story of the world.

In sum, the key difference between a secular story and a theological story is that whereas the former is grounded in human creativity, authority, and narrativity, the latter is ultimately grounded in God’s creativity, authority, and narrativity. Theologically speaking, as characters in God’s story, we do not have the freedom to narrate a story that objectively makes us other than who we are according to God. As Søren Kierkegaard puts it, it is an act of despair to try to define ourselves apart from the power who establishes us. And the only way for such despair to be ‘completely rooted out’, he contends, is for us to discover who we are by ‘rest[ing] transparently in God’.¹⁴ It is only by seeking rest in God that our lives become aligned with God’s story, that we participate in God’s story in a way that orients us towards our proper ends.

Having elaborated further on the difference between God’s story and a secular story, this next section will say something about the content of God’s story that will shape our theological understanding of accountability. In so doing, I recognize it can be problematic to try to hold firmly to a theological metanarrative when Scripture and the later church tradition only provide us with a highly limited and fragmentary picture of God’s story. And even if Scripture were able to present us with a more complete picture, we would still be held back by our inability to transcend our location within God’s story. God’s story is never a story we can read or tell for ourselves from God’s perspective. Nonetheless, this does not take away from the fact that Scripture presents us with enough of a story to be able to try to learn what it means to participate in and embrace God’s story.

1.3 What can Scripture tell us about the human story?

Parallel to the natural history of this world, the story of Scripture begins with creation. And just as not everything about the physical universe is discernible from observations about its remote beginnings, so also not everything about the meaning of creation is made clear in the opening pages of Scripture. Indeed, most of what we learn about creation comes from reading beyond the opening chapters of Genesis. Like any other story that finds itself within a larger story, the Genesis stories of creation need to be interpreted as a part of the larger story. To do so, the

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 20–1. Here, the Augustinian backbone to much of Kierkegaard’s theology comes through, with him echoing Augustine’s famous words ‘you have made us and draw us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you’. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 2nd edn, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 2015), 1.1.1.

opening stories need to be read together with the later stories with which they are united in the canon of Scripture.

One of the things we learn from reading beyond the opening chapters of Genesis and into the New Testament is that 'before the foundation of the world', there is an act of election (Eph. 1:4–5; 2 Tim. 1:9). According to the doctrine of election, creation does not simply come about in or as an impromptu event but unfolds as a story God freely elects to actualize before the ages began, when there is nothing other than God to determine its existence and meaning. As such, when God creates the universe, it is grounded in the teleology for which God prepares it. To learn about this teleology, God inspires the authors of Scripture to work together as witnesses to God's purposes for creation. As such, God not only speaks creation into existence but also, in and through the authors of Scripture, narrates the story of its being, according to which we are given glimpses into the overarching story for which we are created. As Stanley Hauerwas writes:

The Christian claim . . . that God created *ex nihilo* is the metaphysical expression necessary to account for why we know ourselves and our world by the story told about ourselves and our world in the Bible. It is contingency all the way down, which means the only way we have to know God and ourselves is by the connection made possible by truthful stories and, in particular, the story that begins, 'In the beginning.'¹⁵

Without Scripture, or without some other inspired resource(s) to witness to God's narrative, we are left to the flawed task of trying to work out the 'ought' from our immediate experience of the phenomenal 'is'—that is, the history of the cosmos as directly observable to us.¹⁶ The reason such a task is so problematic is that, while the physics, chemistry, and biology of the universe might declare the glory of God (Ps. 19), they neither narrate God's purposes nor offer a direct witness to the meaningful end(s) of creation. We therefore depend upon God's narrative to guide our interpretation of creation.

Despite the difficulties with trying to work out the meaning of creation from our observations of the natural world, this has not prevented theologians from trying to do so. Unsurprisingly, however, such attempts have a track record of running into problems. As we saw in Chapter 3, for example, it was by making certain natural theological (or Aristotelian) judgements about the order of

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Narrative Turn: Thirty Years Later', in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), p. 142.

¹⁶ G. E. Moore famously refers to this move as the naturalistic fallacy, based on David Hume's critique of those who jump too hastily from the 'is and is not' to 'ought and ought not'. See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 9–10; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.1.2 (p. 302).

creation that Aquinas felt led to diminish those whom he observed to be ‘inferior’, such as women and slaves.¹⁷ However, as we also saw in Chapter 3, turning to Scripture does not straightforwardly free us from dangerous error when it comes to discerning God’s story. As history shows, it is very easy to interpret biblical passages according to a particular worldview in a way that gives support not only to sexism and slavery, but also to many other atrocities, prejudices, and forms of oppression.

The problem, however, is that there is no guaranteed way to succeed in discerning God’s story in a way that avoids serious misreading—misreading that can and does serve to endorse the very worst of human practices. That said, there is one way in particular to help guide our reception of God’s story, and that is by making Christ (and his message to the world) foundational to our interpretation of it. The benefit of this approach, for example, is evident in the ways in which the Christologies of Paul and Aquinas put pressure on the problematical aspects of their attitude towards slavery. In the revolutionary words of Paul, for example, ‘in Christ’ we must view one another as wholly equal, as one in whom there is ‘no slave or free’ (Gal. 3:28). Also, as we saw in Chapter 4, while Aquinas may have seen a place for slavery in the fallen order of creation, he did not see a place for it within the order that has been redeemed in Christ. To understand the true (God-ordained) order of creation, for Aquinas, it needs to be interpreted according to the Christocentric order of redemption. So, in short, there are reasons to think that, had a Christological understanding of creation put more pressure on Paul’s and Aquinas’s understanding of the social order, they might have shown a greater resistance to slavery.

When thinking about the relationship between Christ and creation, however, there is more we need to say here. For Paul, Christ is not simply a means to redeem creation, a way to bring God’s story back on track. Nor is Christ merely a lens through which we can become better interpreters of God’s story to avoid, for example, the kinds of stories that support slavery, sexism, and homophobia. Christ is not simply a character in a story ultimately about human salvation, good theology, or moral righteousness; he is not simply a means to the eschatological, intellectual, or moral ends of other humans. Rather, salvation and good theology (and any other human success) are but secondary expressions of a person’s life being brought into alignment with Christ, the one source of salvation and good theology. What is more, the reason why salvation and good theology are an

¹⁷ For another discussion of the problems of attempting to read God’s story of the orders of creation, see Carys Moseley’s excellent chapter, ‘Discarding False Foundations’, on Karl Barth’s debate with Paul Althaus, in which Barth repudiated the Lutheran doctrine of nations as orders of creation. Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 65–97. Also, on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran critique of this doctrine, see Clifford Green’s introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Kraus, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 17–23.

expression of human success is because they are true to the human story that has Christ as its conclusion, a conclusion that brings the story of creation to its fulfilment (Col. 1:15–19).

What happens at the conclusion of God's story of creation? Christ is inaugurated as the lord and king to whom creation belongs as he ascends to the right hand of the Father, where he lives as the high priest who represents humanity to God (Heb. 5:5). In these respects (and others), Christ is the fulfilment of humanity. Consequently, all other humans find their fulfilment (derivatively) by participating in Christ's kingdom, by the power of the Spirit, and by being represented to God the Father in and through him. As we shall discuss in later chapters, this is why Paul is relentless in his affirmation that human fulfilment is to be found *in and through Christ*. God's story of creation is the story *of* Christ—a story that has its end in Christ—such that to understand who we are, we must seek to interpret our place and belonging to God within Christ's narrative and kingdom.

Before deferring to the later chapters, where I shall say more about what it means to identify humanity with Christ, there is one further clarification to add. The reason we must frame the story of creation Christologically is that, most fundamentally, God's story is a Trinitarian story of the Father who loves the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, and of the Son who loves the Father, in the communion of the Holy Spirit; everything else is derivative. To be clear, this is not to suggest that God is a story. Rather, it is to affirm that, in and through creation, a derivative story begins that serves to bear witness to the triune life and economy, one that declares the glory and triune love of God. It is according to this story, and to the one in whom humanity finds its fulfilment, that we can come to understand the true character of humanity—the true account of what humanity is and should be.

There is more to say here about the story I am telling and its relation to the topic of accountability. It will be the aim of this part of the book to offer such elaboration. While much of the discussion in these chapters will centre on Christ, the rest of this chapter will focus on a theme that undergirds and provides context for understanding the Christ narrative: the theme of covenant. The reason for this focus is that the history of covenant testifies to God creating humans to be defined by God's account of who they are and who they should be; it is a history that involves God judging and guiding people in a way that directs them towards the end(s) for which God creates them. God's covenantal relationship with Israel, and ultimately with humanity as a whole, can thus be construed as the definitive way to frame accountability theologically.

2. Covenant

In light of the variety of ways covenant is construed in Scripture and beyond, we need to stipulate precisely how we shall be employing this concept, albeit while

recognizing that Scripture presents us with a far more complex and multifaceted account of this concept than we are able to employ here. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Rolf Rendtorff makes a strong case that there is a formula for thinking about covenant that underlies much of the story of Israel, beginning with Abraham. This is the so-called ‘covenant formula’, which refers to God’s promise to Israel: “I am your God and you are my people.”¹⁸ Applied to accountability, this formula carries the implication: ‘I am your accountant and you are my accountees.’ Or in narrative terms, it implies: ‘I am your author and you are characters in my story.’ With this promise, God establishes a covenant according to which a particular people becomes bound to God and God’s purposes for that people, purposes that generate obligations for how that people must and should live in relationship to God.

There is a theological point to reiterate here, one we touched on earlier and which is critical to the specific way we shall be thinking about covenant. Just because God’s covenant with Abraham comes later in the biblical narrative, this does not imply there is no covenantal relationship between God and humanity from the very origins of humanity. Although the specific word for covenant (*berit*) does not appear until the story of Noah (Gen. 6:18), this does not imply the concept of covenant cannot be applied to the story of creation—at least in the sense we are using it here.¹⁹ For example, it is entirely reasonable to read the concept of covenant into the story of creation by recognizing that, from the very beginning, God is committed to the role of god (as God defines it) in relation to humanity (i.e. to being the God of humanity) and to giving humans a specific role, with obligations and consequences, in their relationship to God (i.e. such that they exist as God’s people).²⁰ We do not need to assume God only later adopts the role of god in relation to a fraction of the world’s population (Israel), and only later decides to adopt this role in relation to the whole world by way of the New Covenant established in Christ. Instead, as we considered in our discussion of theological storytelling, we can assume a progressively disclosive approach to revelation, according to which Scripture takes its time to specify and spell out the covenantal nature of God’s relationship with humanity—and, indeed, to

¹⁸ Rendtorff, *Covenant Formula*, p. 3.

¹⁹ We see the concept of covenant being used in this way, for example, in Isaiah, which speaks of an everlasting covenant between God and creation, which, when broken, leads to chaos and disorder in creation (Isa. 24:1–6). For further discussion of the relationship between creation and the concept of covenant, see Katherine Dell, ‘Covenant and Creation in Relationship’, in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 111–33.

²⁰ The question arises here as to how God can take on the role of a god or become more of a god. I shall say a bit more about this below. For now, however, I think we can interpret biblical texts that make such suggestion as simply saying that God *reveals* Godself as taking on a particular special role in relation to a particular people, a role which that particular people associate with the role of God. I do not think we need to read such texts as speaking to the doctrine of God.

elaborate on many other aspects of God's relationship to creation.²¹ In so doing, we can interpret Israel's covenant history as being a light to other nations, which witnesses to the accountability of all creation to the LORD of Israel. Paying attention to God's relationship to Israel can then prepare us for thinking Christianly about accountability in light of the fulfilment of the covenant that takes place in Jesus Christ, which we shall consider in Chapters 6 and 7.

One of the key theological points we learn from the covenant history of Israel is that while God is certainly responsive to Israel, it is also the case that God communicates God's story to Israel unilaterally; Israel does not negotiate with God when it comes to defining who they are and should be—at least in any ultimate or essential way. Also, God does not tell Israel a story which they can choose to opt into, if and only if it should appeal to them. Rather, God chooses Israel as a people which belongs to God, thereby establishing their identity as God's people. It is on the basis of God's unilateral promise to be Israel's God that God then, through prophecy, tells Israel about what it means to be the people of God. When Israel responds to God's promise to be Israel's God by being faithful to God, they embrace their identity as a covenant people accountable to God in every walk of life. As Peter Craigie notes, for Israel, 'no area of human living is outside the perspective of law and covenant'.²²

In the following subsections, we shall consider some of the features of God's covenantal relationship with Israel and with the world which are relevant for understanding some basic features of accountability to God. In the first subsection, we look at the relationship between promise, covenant, and accountability. In so doing, we conclude there are two ways to think about accountability to God: *universally*, according to the basic creator–creature relationship, and *particularly*, according to the particular purposes to which God calls particular individuals or people. In the second subsection, we discuss the nature of morality within the covenant, proposing that humans must come to understand their moral nature in the context of an interpersonal relationship with God. In the third subsection, we think about how place contributes to relationships of accountability to God. In the fourth subsection, I gather together some of the threads in this chapter by offering a more general and succinct account of how we might understand the relationship between creation and covenant based on the theology of Karl Barth. Then, in the final subsection, we shall turn to think about the metaphysics of what I shall call 'covenant existence': the existence of humans in covenant relationship with God.

²¹ For example, we are able to draw important connections between humanity being created in the image of God with Christ, whom Paul presents uniquely as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col. 1:15). Or, to take another example, we are able to rethink what it means for God to be with humanity and to speak to humanity in Trinitarian terms.

²² Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 42.

2.1 Promise and covenant

As I just noted, God's unilateral promise(s) to be Israel's God is fundamental to the relationship of accountability God establishes with Israel. On the basis of God's promise, God assumes a particular authority over Israel as Israel's God. This raises a series of questions: *Does God's covenant promise(s) reveal a relationship of accountability that already exists (since creation always belongs to God and is defined by God)? Does God's covenant promise(s) create a new relationship of accountability? Or is there a sense in which both are true?*

Before we address these questions, it will be helpful to say a little more about how we should think about the relationship between the God who promises and the recipients of that promise, particularly in relation to Israel. The first point to clarify is that God's promise(s) to be God for Israel is not itself the covenant; rather, it is what unilaterally establishes God's covenant relationship with Israel. Once God makes God's promise, Israel then comes to exist within the domain of the covenant defined by that promise. The covenant formula is not 'I *can* be your God and you *can* be my people *if* you do x or y', but a formula that involves a unilateral and unconditioned promise that defines a people. On the basis of God's promise, Israel becomes, in and by its very essence, a holy people. It is therefore proclaimed to Israel: 'you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession' (Deut. 7:6; see also 14:2).

While God's covenant with Israel is established by a unilateral promise, it is also true there is no covenant without a promisee: one to whom God obligates Godself by making a promise and who thereby defines Godself by that promise. As Stephen Darwall notes, when a promise is made, the promisee develops 'a distinctive normative standing or authority in relation to the promiser that third parties do not have. . . . The promiser/promisee relation gives rise, we might say, to an obligor/obligee relation.'²³ One of the implications of God obligating Godself to the people of Israel is that God gives them a voice with which they can, at times, appear to hold God accountable. We see this, for example, when Abraham pleads to God to have mercy on Sodom: 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' (Gen. 18:23). We also see this when Moses petitions God not to wipe out God's people: 'Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people' (Exod. 32:12). And in response, 'the LORD changed his mind about the disaster he had planned to bring on his people' (Exod. 32:14). In instances such as these, a petition is made by a creature who holds God to a particular account of who they think God should

²³ Stephen Darwall, *Morality, Authority, and Law: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 20.

be according to God's covenant. Furthermore, the texts clearly present God as being impacted by this act of holding to account.

When we consider texts such as these, which present humans holding God accountable, the God-human relationship of accountability can appear to be a reciprocal one in which each side possesses a certain authority over the other. Yet there are reasons to hesitate being too quick to ascribe symmetry to this relationship. When thinking about the role human promisees play in their relationship with God, there are other more basic questions we need to address. First, why do promises generate obligations on the part of a promiser—why should a promiser keep their promise? Second, who is it that judges whether Abraham's or Moses's petitions are just? On the basis of whose morality do Abraham and Moses make their judgements?

To address these questions, it will be helpful to reiterate three of this book's premises which we laid out in the introductory chapter: (1) all authority ultimately comes from God, as the author of creation; (2) the one true narrative according to which we should judge all other narratives is the story for which God creates the world; and (3) each of us is ultimately accountable to God as characters in God's story. If we accept these premises, it is not difficult to offer a brief response to our two questions. That is, it is on the basis of God's authority, God's narrative, and our ultimate accountability to God that we recognize, first, that promises generate obligations, and second, that Abraham's and Moses's petitions are deemed just. So, when God's promises oblige God to human promisees, and when humans appear to hold God accountable, these things happen in a context ultimately defined by accountability to God. God's promises generate obligations upon God. However, this is not to suggest humans can hold God accountable because God and humanity live together in some higher overarching social or moral order which defines how both parties should interact with each other.

This does raise the question, however, as to why some passages in Scripture appear to suggest humans can hold God accountable. If the above three premises are correct, then we need to say that such passages should not lead us to conclude that humans occasionally have an authority or standing over God with which they can remind God how to be God and how to flourish in God's role because God has failed to be Godself. Such passages should not lead us to conclude that Abraham or Moses have an authority to help God fulfil God's role as a just God. How, then, might we interpret such passages? We could say that instances in which humans appear to hold God accountable serve a pedagogical purpose. From such instances, we can learn, for example, that it is appropriate for us to expect certain things from God (e.g. based on God's self-revelation as just, faithful, merciful, and a keeper of promises); we can learn that we should bring our uncertainties, our concerns, our lamentations, and our petitions to God (rather than keeping them to ourselves); and, perhaps, we can learn that, by petitioning God, we can have an impact on the history of God's relationship with the world. That is, we might say

God has intentionally set things up within the covenant such that God determines to respond to human requests. These are a few things we can learn from situations in which God allows for the appearance that humans can hold God accountable.

The other point to mention here, albeit briefly, is that the authors of Scripture sometimes offer an anthropomorphic presentation of God, which leads them to treat God as someone whom human creatures can hold accountable. This anthropomorphic understanding also means, to offer another example, that we can find the authors of Scripture suggesting that humans can remind God of God's promises (e.g. Neh. 1:8; Ps. 119:49–50; Isa. 62:6). It is not until later in Christian thought that theologians of the church would become more clearly committed to an interpretation of God whereby God's radical transcendence is taken to imply that God is less (or not at all) caught up in the contingencies of creation, and who therefore should not be treated as one whom humans can remind or hold accountable (according to our definition of accountability).²⁴

Now we are a little clearer about the relationship established by God's promise(s), let us return to the questions that were raised at the beginning of this subsection. Does God's covenant promise(s) reveal a relationship of accountability that already exists? Does God's covenant promise(s) create a relationship of accountability? Or is there a sense in which both are true? To address these questions, it will be helpful to consider two different kinds of relationships of accountability to God: (1) the universal relationship of accountability, and (2) particular relationships of accountability.

First, the *universal relationship of accountability* refers to the relationship according to which God is the ultimate accountor over all: the one who, as creator of heaven and earth, is the only LORD (Isa. 45:18); the LORD to whom belongs 'the earth . . . and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it' (Ps. 24:1); the LORD whose 'dominion endures through all generations' (Ps. 145:13); the source of all authority (Rom. 13:1); and the one before whom 'no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account' (Heb. 4:13). It is based on this view of accountability that God is considered the ultimate authority over all: the one who defines every facet of creaturely existence, as expressed in our three premises on accountability to God. Indeed, it is even suggested in Genesis 9:5 that every non-human animal is accountable to God. According to this universal relationship of accountability, God's promise to be Israel's God speaks to a relationship of accountability that applies to the whole of creation. As such, Israel is chosen to be a people called to learn about the authority God has over all from the very beginning of creation. So, in their accountability to God, Israel exists as a people which witnesses to God's authority over all the nations, over the whole world. According to this relationship of accountability, as

²⁴ We can certainly find a number of passages in Scripture which suggest that God is wholly transcendent, e.g. 1 Kgs 8:27–8; 2 Chr. 2:6; Ps. 97:9; Isa. 55:8–9.

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, 'being accountable to God for doing justice is not contingent on being a member of the covenant people [of Israel]'.²⁵

Second, we also find *particular relationships of accountability to God* in Scripture. According to these relationships, particular individuals and groups of people become accountable to God in a particular way that is not applicable to all persons. Furthermore, God takes on a particular name in these relationships: the Tetragrammaton or 'the LORD'. In such instances, to address our questions above, God's promise(s) creates new relationships of accountability and God takes on a particular role as accountor. For example, God becomes the following: the God who creates humans to exist in a particular way (i.e. in the image of God); the God of Israel; the God over all in and through Christ—'the God of Gentiles also' (Rom. 3:29). In Scripture, these particular relationships are often compared to a marriage, a metaphor we find throughout the Hebrew Bible to refer to God's relationship to Israel (e.g. Hosea),²⁶ and deployed in the New Testament to refer to the church's relationship to Christ (e.g. Eph. 5:23–24; 2 Cor. 11:2). The reason God has the right to establish *particular* covenant relationships unilaterally—to arrange a particular marriage on God's own terms—is because of the *universal* relationship of accountability that exists between God and creatures. On this basis, it is presupposed that God has a right to define creation, to take Israel as God's people, to establish God's kingdom in Christ, and to do these things in a way that does not involve an unjust act of tyranny. Universally, God holds an authority to claim any particular part of creation to be God's own possession. So again, when God claims a part of creation in a particular way, such a claim merely witnesses to the fact that all creation already belongs to God, that there exists a universal relationship of accountability to God.

While it is possible to draw distinctions between a universal relationship and particular relationships of accountability to God, it is also the case that the term 'universal' is being used here relative to the particular creation in which we find ourselves—that is, to refer to the way in which all creation is accountable to God. Universal accountability to God, therefore, does not transcend the particularities of creation, the particular ways in which creatures find themselves accountable to God in different times and places. As such, this universal accountability could itself be characterized as a particular relationship of accountability insofar as it is contingent upon there being a particular creation created to be accountable to God. To explore this particularity further, the following two subsections will consider, first, the particular ways in which morality is embraced within different covenant relationships, and then second, the particular places in which creatures

²⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 89.

²⁶ See Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

participate in covenant relationship to God. We shall then turn to the theology of Karl Barth to think more universally about how we might succinctly understand the relationship between covenant and creation. Then, in the final subsection of this chapter, we shall think about certain aspects of the metaphysics of human existence in covenant relationship with God.

2.2 The particular moral framework of covenant(s)

When God establishes a covenantal relationship with a particular people by way of promise, these covenants are accompanied by God giving moral guidance that reveals how God's people should fulfil their role in relationship to God. We see this, for example, with the Abrahamic covenant: 'This is my covenant, which you [Abraham] shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised' (Gen. 17:10; see also Gen. 17:1). We see this with the Mosaic covenant: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; [therefore] you shall/shall not do this' (Exod. 20:2–17). We also see this in connection with the New Covenant mediated through Jesus Christ: for example, when preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims, 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not do this".... But I say to you do this' (Matt. 5:21–48).²⁷

One of the things we can notice when comparing the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants is that there are developments in how God relates covenantally to God's people. And these developments are accompanied by changes to the moral obligations and moral formation that exist within the covenant. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, we see Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant, presenting a new vision of morality to a particular people in a new context, which exceeds the moral vision of the Mosaic covenant.²⁸ Also, when it comes to the covenant obligation of circumcision, we find different moral guidance appears to have been given to Abraham's offspring in the Abrahamic covenant and to Gentiles in light of the New Covenant in Christ (Gal. 5:2–6).

Yet, while God appears to offer divergent moral guidance to different people at different times and in different contexts, this does not mean God's ways are

²⁷ The covenant context for the Sermon on the Mount is not explicit. However, in this sermon, Christ presents himself as the one who comes to fulfil the law, which indicates that he understands his message within a covenant framework and is signalling that a New Covenant is being mediated to world through him. It is on this basis that he taught as 'one having authority' (Matt. 7:29). Also, much of the sermon presents an account of what it means to be a people which belongs to God the Father, the one true master. As I am proposing, this is indicative of a covenantal understanding of the relationship between God and humanity—at least, if we accept the broad concept of covenant I am employing here.

²⁸ As the author of Hebrews writes, Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant, grounded in promises better than those of the Mosaic covenant (Heb. 8:6). With this New Covenant, God puts God's laws in the minds of God's people and writes God's laws on their hearts (Heb. 8:10).

inconsistent or episodic. So long as we are unable to see things from God's perspective, we may also be unable to perceive ultimate coherence to God's moral guidance. Furthermore, we should also bear in mind that God's guidance is received within cultural frameworks that can impact and potentially distort how it is received. This may mean, for example, that some of the ethically problematic passages in Scripture could be based on a human cultural understanding rather than strictly on divine revelation.²⁹ Indeed, when faced with such passages, there may be valid reasons to draw a line in the sand between their portrayal of justice and the vision of justice revealed through God's incarnate Word (see John 8:3–11).³⁰ If, for example, we want to affirm a vision of justice that is affirming of life and resistant to torture, we may, consciously or unconsciously, disregard passages that suggest that sometimes (at least in the past) it is just to stone a person to death—whether it be for witchcraft (Lev. 20:27), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), gathering wood on the Sabbath day (Num. 15:32–6), worshipping other gods (Deut. 13:6–11; 17:2–5), being a stubborn and rebellious son (Deut. 21:18–21), or adultery (Deut. 22:20–4). However we decide to deal with such passages, the key point here is that the appearance of inconsistencies in Scripture—that is, between the Old and New Covenants—need not necessarily lead us to question the consistency of God's justice.

Aside from these difficulties, what can we say more positively about what the moral frameworks of covenant tell us about God's people?³¹ In short, they speak to how God's people can and should fulfil their roles as God's people; they tell us about how they should live if they are to flourish and express themselves as the people of God. What they do not tell us is what God's people must do to become or remain God's people. The moral guidance or law that accompanies God's promises do not introduce conditions that make covenant partnership dependent upon obedience to God—Paul indicates this in Galatians 3:17–18. This means that when God's people experience God-forsakenness, divine wrath, and/or divine punishment and destruction, they do so *as* God's people—as a people which God loves enough to discipline so they might learn how to dignify themselves as

²⁹ For example, it may have been human religion rather than divine revelation that summoned the belief that a person should be put to death for working on the Sabbath day (Exod. 31:15). It may have been human judgement rather than divine guidance that set forth a law that 'enshrines wartime rape' (Deut. 21:10–14); see Caryn Reeder, 'Deuteronomy 21.10–14 and/as Wartime Rape', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 3 (2017): pp. 313–36. Also, it may have been a human view of morality rather than divine morality that invited persons to stone a young woman for adultery 'because she was in a town and did not scream for help' (Deut. 22:24); see Caryn Reeder, 'Sex and Execution: Deuteronomy 22:20–24', *Expository Times* 124, no. 6 (2013): pp. 272–81.

³⁰ I acknowledge there are some passages in the New Testament where we can find violent and destructive images of Jesus, e.g. Luke 19:27; 2 Thess. 1:7–9; Rev. 19:11–16. That said, I think we can interpret such images as primarily depicting Jesus's opposition to sin and to the powers and principalities that stand against the love of God, rather than presenting a Jesus who is violent towards humans *per se*.

³¹ Clearly, the difficulties raised in the previous paragraph would benefit from further careful discussion, given they are contentious. However, such discussion is beyond the scope of this book.

God's people.³² How might we construe this relationship of accountability in the terms of our definition of accountability?

The covenantal accountability of God's people: God's people relate to God as the LORD who has authority to judge relevant aspects of who they are and should be relative to their role in the shared project of being God's people; a project that characterizes the relationship between God and God's people and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to God's people.

So, when God takes possession of a people by establishing a covenant with them, God not only identifies and defines that people but also judges them so that their lives might come to reflect both who they are and who they should be within that covenant. Yet, unlike many relationships of accountability, accountability to God is not merely a short-term arrangement that exists until God's people achieve a certain end (e.g. a virtuous state of existence). It is not comparable to a short-term relationship of accountability a student might have with her teacher until she graduates. Rather, God's covenant people only ever find fulfilment *with God*—in God's presence, and under God's authority. This means their flourishing is dependent upon accountability to God being a permanent fixture in their lives. There is no graduating from accountability to God to a higher state of existence because the true end for God's people never exceeds faithful participation in covenant relationship with God.

To secure this end, God does not simply communicate abstract moral guidance from a distance, from a place of transcendence. Rather, God seeks to transform persons by transforming them from within, and this will be an expression of God's covenant faithfulness: 'I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart' (Jer. 24:6–7). Indeed, for the author of Hebrews, an essential feature of the new and superior covenant—the one mediated in and through Jesus Christ—is the greater faithfulness it achieves from God's people by putting God's law in their minds and writing it on their hearts (Heb. 8:6–13). By the power of the Holy Spirit, God's people are given to relate to God in and through Jesus Christ in a way that awakens and readies them to become properly responsive to God the Father.

The critical point here, for our purposes, is that human morality is ultimately to be understood as a part of the vocations taken up *in* intimate relationship to the divine accountant: *universally*, as creatures of God, and *particularly*, according to

³² See Amos 3:2.

the specific roles to which God calls people. Again, therefore, the moral framework of God's covenant is not based on some abstract moral code or law, which is directly accessible to a faculty of reason or conscience that humans naturally possess. Rather, human morality is given its shape according to the loving commands of God. Not only are these commands required to tell God's people *how they should* live accountably to God; they are also needed to establish *that they are* accountable to God—to reveal that God has ultimate authority over them. Under these circumstances, as Jon Levenson writes, 'good deeds become acts of personal fidelity, faithfulness to the personal God . . . [and] bad deeds become acts of betrayal, akin to adultery'.³³ Accordingly, Levenson quotes a Talmudic saying that neatly captures the moral character of the covenant order: 'Greater is he who has been commanded and does the deed than he who has not been commanded and does the deed.'³⁴ To clarify this point, the reason God's commands are so important is that, without the commands of God,³⁵ humans cannot fulfil their vocations. God's commands are not only required to inform humans about their vocations, but also to provide the very ground of human vocation. This is because humans have been created to find fulfilment as respondents to God's calling and judgement. Apart from God, humans are left to trust in their own moral authority, guided by their own knowledge of good and evil. As we consider in Chapter 6, to be oriented to ourselves as the primary source of our meaning and morality is the original sin that is the basis of all other sin.

2.3 The particular place of covenant history

Because God's covenants are established with people who are situated within creation, God's people can only live as God's people according to the particular created place in which they receive and interpret God's commands. Many of the moral dimensions of covenant, therefore, are bound up with the sociocultural, historical, geographical, neuropsychological, and linguistic dimensions of a particular people. This does not mean morality per se is relativistic, but simply that the human reception of God's commands cannot but be shaped by the embodied existence of humans. While God's commands quite clearly introduce new moral guidance into the world, it is nevertheless true that humans only ever experience God's address according to the particular place in which they are embodied, a place shaped by its past history. Human culture and tradition, therefore, inevitably contribute to the interpretation of God's commands.

³³ Levenson, *Love of God*, p. 14.

³⁴ *b. Bava Qamma* 38a, cited in Levenson, *Love of God*, p. 16.

³⁵ To clarify here, the commands of God can be communicated to persons in a variety of ways: they can be spoken by God, communicated through the prophets, or, indeed, written on our hearts and minds.

The deep connection between the place and morality of God's people is accentuated in the way that Israel's moral vision is bound up with their experience of the land. As Ellen Davis contends, for Israel, 'the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship'.³⁶ She points out that when the people of Israel are disobedient, thorns and thistles emerge (Gen. 3:17–19), there is severe drought (Deut. 11:11–17; 28:24), and the land languishes and mourns (Isa. 16:8; 33:9; Hos. 4:3). Yet, when Israel is faithful to God, the land is lush with growth; 'faithfulness will spring up from the ground' (Ps. 85:11).³⁷

The significance of place in covenant history is also evident in the way that God's promise to be Israel's God inaugurates a history of relationship in and through which God delivers Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land—out of slavery and into a place of sanctuary and flourishing. Accordingly, God's account of who Israel should be is bound up with the provision of a particular land where they would live in accountability to God.³⁸ This land provides a secure place for Israel to find belonging, to establish roots, and to form a national, ethnic, and historical identity defined by accountability to God. For Israel, therefore, as Walter Brueggemann stresses, 'sense of place is a primary category of faith'.³⁹ He clarifies this by distinguishing a sense of place from a sense of space:

'Space' means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority. Space . . . is characterized by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing. . . . But 'place' is a very different matter. Place is a space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.⁴⁰

The Promised Land is the place for Israel to grow in their accountability to God. With God dwelling among them in the temple, it was a place for them to learn

³⁶ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8.

³⁷ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, p. 8.

³⁸ Interestingly, as Ellen Davis points out, in Lev. 18:25, land is presented as 'a semi-autonomous moral agent. Though it can be victimized by its inhabitants, it remains accountable to God even for the defilement it suffers at human hands.' Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, p. 100.

³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Land*, p. 4.

about who they are and who they should be in the presence of God, guided by God's calling and judgement, which is mediated to them through prophets, priests, and kings. As Scripture also makes clear, however, it was by no means easy for Israel to grasp what it means to be God's people. Prophecy was continually needed, not only to teach Israel about their calling, but also, quite simply, to remind them that they are God's people and therefore have a calling to fulfil.⁴¹ Indeed, the forgetfulness of Israel became so serious that it led God to punish them by exile from the Promised Land to experience a God-forsakenness that was at times overwhelming—to the point where Israel feared God might divorce or leave them altogether. Through exile, Israel was reminded that the Promised Land is not a place where they are free to be whoever they want to be, to worship whatever they want to worship, but a place where the purpose of their existence is given to them by the sovereign God who judges them accordingly.

To be clear, God does not only dwell with God's people in the Promised Land; God is also present with Israel in the wilderness and in their exile.⁴² So what is it that marks out the Promised Land as a place where God is especially present? One way to answer this question is to say that, when Israel settled into the Promised Land, they found a more stable experience of God's presence and faithfulness; Israel experienced God's presence as having a greater intimacy and permanence, meaning they found greater security in their relationship to God. As such, the Promised Land provided a context where there could be a greater awareness of accountability to God. Yet this greater sense of security also meant there was a greater sense of loss—a deeper experience of God's absence—when Israel became exiled from the Promised Land.

Although the way in which Israel's accountability to God is tied up with a sense of place is unique, there are analogies that can be drawn to help us connect with this aspect of Israel's accountability to God. For example, a school and a classroom can both be construed as places that ground a relationship of accountability between teachers and students. In the context of a school, the relationship of accountability between a teacher and a student is clearly defined, and it becomes even more clearly defined in the context of a specific classroom. Within a school or a classroom, a teacher is recognized as having a particular authority in relationship to the student, which is less apparent outside of that context. Also, within these contexts, there are more clearly defined rituals that generate a greater awareness of the accountability between a student and teacher—for example, a bell ringing to signal the start and end of class, a teacher standing at the front of

⁴¹ Eventually, Israel's remembrance of their identity is secured by God giving them a heart to know the LORD to whom they belong, so they can return their whole heart to the LORD (Jer. 24:7).

⁴² For an excellent discussion of this point, see John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

the classroom with the students facing her, and the teacher calling for periods of silence so that students can focus on their work.

Now, as we might learn during a pandemic, when students end up being locked down in their homes, it is still possible for there to be a relationship of accountability between a teacher and a student via online interactions. Generally speaking, however, online interactions, which take place away from schools and classrooms, make it much harder for a teacher to maintain a relationship of accountability with her students. The less obvious presence of the teacher undermines this relationship of accountability, which is likely to undermine the intellectual flourishing of many students, especially for those without parents to support their home learning. Similarly, during Israel's time in the wilderness and exile—when and where God's presence was less evident to Israel—there was a less stable context for Israel to be cognizant of their accountability to God. This made it harder for Israel to flourish in relationship with God.

Yet it should also be acknowledged that there were ways in which the stability of the Promised Land did not serve Israel's relationship of accountability to God. When Israel became too comfortable in the Promised Land, they became forgetful of their need for God and grew overconfident in their own power and self-sufficiency. Gradually, their respect for God's authority dwindled and became displaced by their own sense of autonomy, or, indeed, of autarchy. Yet, while Israel may have grown forgetful of their covenant commitment to God, God never forgot or reneged upon God's covenant commitment to Israel. Indeed, it is precisely because of this commitment that Israel experiences punishment. Put another way, as a loving mother and father, God cares enough to punish Israel, to discipline them, so as to remind them of their accountability to God.⁴³ Such an approach is also taken in the contexts of schools when students are suspended or even expelled when they resist their accountability to their teachers in serious ways. In both situations, persons who fall short in their relationship of accountability are taken away from a place of accountability to try to remind them of the importance of the relationship of accountability they were neglecting or perhaps disregarding altogether. In the case of Israel, the shock of exile led them to become uncertain about God's presence and ongoing faithfulness. Yet they never ceased to hope that God would restore them, and their hope reposed on their sense of God's assurance.⁴⁴ So while Israel's sin and transgression are met, for a time, with suffering, death, destruction, and an experience of utter God-forsakenness, it is also the case that the waywardness of Israel was never able to overshadow God's

⁴³ For an account of exile as punishment, see Deut. 29:25–8. In the following chapter, we are given a description of the complete restoration that will be brought about when Israel remembers God's blessing and curse and returns to obey God's command with all their heart and soul (Deut. 30:1–2). For further examples of the pedagogical function of God's discipline, accompanied by an account of God's covenant commitment to restoration, see Lev. 26.

⁴⁴ See Jer. 29:10–14.

commitment to restoration; nothing that Israel did served to nullify God's covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) to Israel and God's overarching commitment to their freedom and flourishing as God's people.⁴⁵ Accordingly, with reference to the covenant theology of Hosea and Jeremiah (expressed in terms of the marriage between God and Israel), Jon Levenson writes:

the tender affections of an idyllic honeymoon give way to adultery and punishment, but the last word is one of favour and intimacy restored in a remarriage or reconciliation. In the past, Israel's capacity to sin may have proved more powerful than their love for God, but now God's love for them proves more powerful than sin.⁴⁶

So, again, while there are times when it seems as though God gives up on God's covenant with Israel because of their disobedience, we can see (retrospectively) that the covenant story always bends towards and ultimately ends in reconciliation with God. Yet the story does not simply end with a return to the Promised Land but with the Promised Land expanding to fill the whole of creation. When we look to the consummation of Israel's history, to the New Covenant mediated in and through Jesus Christ, we can revise the covenant formula to refer to God's larger story of creation as a whole: 'I am your God and you are my creation.' What was once only known to be true for Israel is now known to be true for the whole world. This is why, in 2 Corinthians 6:16, Paul is emboldened to take the promise from Leviticus 26:12 and Ezekiel 37:27—'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'—and apply it beyond Israel to the church, including Gentiles. In so doing, Paul reads the story of Israel in line with Israel's calling to be a light to the nations, a calling that finds fulfilment in Israel's messiah Jesus Christ, whom the church embodies. This does not mean God's plan changes but that it progresses. What becomes increasingly clear is that it was God's plan all along to communicate creation's accountability to God in and through situated people: through Israel, through Christ, and then through

⁴⁵ Moreover, this is something Israel is said to know: 'and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things the LORD your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed' (Josh. 23:14; see also 21:45). To be transparent, this verse is accompanied by the assertion that 'just as all the good things the LORD your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the LORD your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you' (Josh. 23:15–16). However, what is important to recognize here is that even in destruction, Israel does not cease to be God's people. Moreover, it is quite clear that Israel experiences the LORD's punishment because they are God's people and, therefore, must be punished for their transgressions—albeit with a punishment that never undermines their flourishing more than the transgression itself.

⁴⁶ Levenson, *Love of God*, p. 116.

particular churches. Gradually but persistently, God's revelation was mediated and interpreted in and through the geographical, historical, and sociocultural contexts in which particular people are placed and formed.

2.4 Karl Barth on creation and covenant

Having considered some of the particular features of God's covenant relationship(s) with humans, let us return to think more broadly about human accountability to God. While Jewish and Christian traditions both advocate an anthropology that aligns with the view of covenant we are considering (according to which God defines God's people), one theologian who captures this particularly well is Karl Barth in his account of the relationship between creation and covenant.⁴⁷ So, to tie together our discussion of the relationship between God's covenant purposes and creation succinctly, it is helpful to turn to a few passages from his writings that encapsulate our interpretation of the fundamental story of creation as one of covenant.

For Barth, when God decides to create:

[God] constitutes [*setzt*] Himself the Lord of the covenant. He is, therefore, its free author. He gives it its content and determines its order. He maintains it. He directs it to its goal. He governs it in every respect. It is His decision that there is a covenant-partner. It is also His decision who this partner is, and what must befall him.⁴⁸

According to Barth, God creates the world to inaugurate a covenant story. In so doing, God creates humans to be God's covenant partners: creatures from whom God wills, expects, and demands something. Humans belong to God and so must exist according to God's covenant purposes. For this reason, Barth is well known for referring to creation as the external basis of the covenant. He writes:

The creature does not exist casually. It does not merely exist, but exists meaningfully. In its existence it realizes a purpose and plan and order. It has not come into being by chance but by necessity, and therefore not as an accident but as a sign and witness of this necessity. This is already implied in the fact that it is a

⁴⁷ For further discussion of Barth's understanding of the relationship between creation and covenant, see my chapter 'Creation and Covenant: Karl Barth's Exegesis of Genesis 2:8–17', in *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: Freedom Under the Word*, ed. Ben Rhodes and Martin Westerholm (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 175–96.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), II/2, p. 9. Hereafter, '*Church Dogmatics*' is abbreviated as 'CD'.

creature and therefore the work of the Creator, of God. As God Himself does not exist casually but in the power of His own divine meaning and His own divine necessity, so also the creature exists by Him and is the revelation of His glory.⁴⁹

As the external basis of the covenant, 'creation is the road to the covenant'.⁵⁰ The covenant itself is thus the 'internal basis of creation' in that creation 'was foreordained for the establishment and the history of the covenant':⁵¹

The fact that the covenant is the goal of creation is not something which is added later to the reality of the creature, as though the history of creation might equally have been succeeded by any other history. It already characterizes creation itself and as such, and therefore the being and existence of the creature. The covenant whose history had still to commence was the covenant which, as the goal appointed for creation and the creature, made creation necessary and possible, and determined and limited the creature.⁵²

What Barth portrays so clearly in his account of covenant history is that creation exists according to a unifying set of purposes that precede and define each and every moment of its existence. This position is echoed in our three underlying premises about accountability to God: (1) all authority ultimately comes from God, as the author of creation; (2) the one true narrative according to which we should judge all other narratives is the story for which God creates the world; and (3) each of us is ultimately accountable to God as characters in God's story. So, as we discussed when considering the distinction between particular and universal relationships of accountability to God, when God tells Abraham about God's purpose for a chosen people, God is communicating to Abraham a particular story that is a part of a much bigger story, one that is not only prior to the creation of the world, but is also the very reason God chose to create. Again, therefore, the story of creation, as one that God authors, is not a story that unfolds on the condition that creation chooses to make this story its own. Rather, it is a story that undergirds every facet of created reality; it is a story that is more fundamental to creation's identity than its physicality, its temporality, its spatiality, its autonomy—and so on. God's story of creation is not a story that merely makes sense of a pre-existing reality, but one that is the very reason creation exists.

There is much more to be said about the covenant theology we have considered in this chapter. The purpose of the chapter is simply to draw attention to some of the key features of the relationship between creation and covenant that are relevant to our theology of accountability. Before we conclude, let us briefly consider some of the extrabiblical metaphysical assumptions that undergird our

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD* III/1, pp. 229–30.

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD* III/1, p. 231.

⁵¹ Barth, *CD* III/1, p. 231.

⁵² Barth, *CD* III/1, p. 231.

covenantal theology. By striving to be transparent about where we are coming from, we will not only be able to gain a deeper understanding of this position, but we will also find it easier to work out the basis for any reservations that might arise.

2.5 The metaphysics of covenant existence

The first point to make about the metaphysics of covenant existence is that, insofar as a covenant relationship of accountability is bilateral, God needs to create accountees who are other than God. Accountees must have their own distinct roles to play as accountees in God's story. This otherness is grounded in the extrabiblical understanding that God exists necessarily as the fundamental reality, whereas we exist contingently as a part of created reality—as part of a world that God creates out of nothing.

While the covenant relationship may need to be bilateral, this does not mean God and creation have symmetrical roles to play in determining the nature of this relationship. The ground of this relationship never ceases to be a unilateral action on God's part; God is not somehow eternally tangled up with the history God determines to create. If we are to maintain the doctrine of divine aseity, then we must say that God in Godself is not dependent on anything external to God. God is *a se*; that is, God is God in, of, and from Godself eternally. Nevertheless, we can also say that God is free, in a loving act of self-determination, to elect to be God with that which is not God—God is free to become creator. This being the case, as Jon Levenson points out, 'to say that the God of covenantal monotheism is "wholly independent" is dangerously misleading'.⁵³ Again, covenant depends on God creating an accountee(s) with whom God can have a bilateral relationship. It would seem that such an accountee(s) must have a concrete existence and cannot merely exist as an abstract idea that exists eternally in the mind of God. It is difficult to see how God could have a relationship of accountability with a divine idea of a creature(s).

In maintaining there is a real difference between God's idea of creatures and the particular creatures that come to exist concretely, we do not imply that God-plus-creation is a greater good than God-in-Godself. If God is the source of all goodness, then the act of creation cannot add to God's goodness; creation cannot scratch some divine itch. One of the implications of this is that it is not possible for God to exploit creation for God's own ends. As Rowan Williams notes, 'creation really is "good for nothing"'.⁵⁴ Creation comes to be in an act of pure charity. Furthermore, every subsequent act of God towards creation takes place as an

⁵³ Levenson, *Love of God*, pp. 174–5.

⁵⁴ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), p. 72.

expression of this very same charity. When thinking about accountability to God, therefore, God's judgement of us does not somehow bring fulfilment to God—for example, to God's own justice. Rather, God's judgement only ever serves to bring about our fulfilment in accountability to God. Accordingly, Williams also writes, 'God "uses" us for the sake of our greatest good, which is, of course, loving God: God uses us so that we may come to *our* highest good, not so that *God's* good may be served. Our good is God, and, consequently, the love of one another in God.'⁵⁵

There is another point to make here about the bilateral nature of the relationship between God and creatures. When God creates something other than God, something particular that has a concrete existence, that something is entirely new. As such, God's knowledge of a created person(s) *as that* particular person(s) (assuming such knowledge is possible) will be contingent: contingent upon that entirely new person existing concretely. This means God's knowledge of a particular person must, in some sense, be a knowledge by acquaintance. For God, this might perhaps be acquaintance with (what is to us) the future existence of that person (if such acquaintance is possible); that is, it might be acquaintance that God has with a person before we know them to be formed in their mother's womb (Jer. 1:5).⁵⁶ However, insofar as God's knowledge is an eternal knowledge of a particular person—rather than, say, an eternal knowledge of abstract universal human nature—there will need to be a reference point in (what is to us) the future existence of that person.

Based on the metaphysical assumptions we have just laid out, we can say that our particular identities belong both to God and also to us—to God first, and to us second. In other words, God creates us to belong to God with the dignity of having our own personal identities. While it is only on the basis of God's creative activity that we can come to exist, God's creativity gives us our own created existence. God freely determines to give us space to act in ways that are not wholly determined by God such that we can contribute to the formation of our character through our own historical activity. Nevertheless, it remains the case that our particular lives can only find fulfilment when we return to our source—to the one to whom we ultimately belong—to embrace our existence as characters in God's narrative.

Since we are thinking about accountability according to a narrative framework, it is relevant to clarify further how we understand what it means for us to be a character(s) in God's narrative. The first point to mention is that we are proceeding on the assumption that human persons persist through time, that God knows each created person as the same person over the course of their life. As we shall consider in Chapter 9, it is certainly true we can experience radical transformation

⁵⁵ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 73.

⁵⁶ If this knowledge by acquaintance is possible, it is because the eternal God transcends time such that created history is ever present to God in a way it is not for us as creatures who experience the transitoriness that comes with existing within time. Clearly, there is much more to say on this issue, but an in-depth discussion of God's relation to time is beyond the scope of this book.

in relationship to God (see Gal. 2:19–20). However, as Tom McCall argues convincingly, it is hard to make the theological case that this happens to such an extent that our personal identities are ever wholly annihilated and replaced by entirely new ones.⁵⁷ Indeed, if *our* personal identities were ever wholly annihilated, then, technically, anything said to replace them would not be *our* identity. So we shall not entertain the possibility that God might not sustain the persistence of our existence in a way that undermines the persistence of our identities.

So, what assumptions can we make about the role God plays as the author of the creation narrative? We have acknowledged that at times Scripture appears to present God as a character within a larger story, as one who exists alongside us within a spatiotemporal cosmos, and as one whom even human creatures can hold to account. Yet, moving beyond Scripture, we find the church coming to accept the theological assumption that God does not exist temporally *within* a story or *as* a story.⁵⁸ According to the extrabiblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, when God creates, God's creative act is not itself historical (that is, it is not located in time); it is only creation, as it comes into existence *ex nihilo*, that is historical.⁵⁹ Time exists as a facet of creation.

In every respect, therefore, God is the author of the narrative of creation; nothing else contributes to the existence and meaning of creation. Consequently, when questions arise as to how we can know that a particular person persists through time, the basic answer to this question is that God preserves the existence of that person through time for the sake of maintaining covenant relationship. How precisely God does this is not something we can even begin to understand phenomenologically, confined as we are to our first-person perspective and experience within the narrative of creation history. It is certainly possible, for example, that some kind of physical and/or psychological persistence is an important part of the equation. Yet the question of how exactly a particular person persists through time is not a question we need to consider here.

But what if there appears to be a temporal gap in a particular person's historical existence—for example, between death and resurrection? Any anxiety about such a gap only emerges when we arrogate to ourselves the ability to grasp the persistence conditions of personal identity. While being embodied in time may be essential to human existence, it is unclear why the continual persistence of that existence according to phenomenal time—time as we experience it—is necessary

⁵⁷ Thomas McCall, *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 7–38.

⁵⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Francesca Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ Some would stretch to argue that Col. 1:15 and Heb. 11:3 provide support for the doctrine of creation out of nothing. If these texts do, in fact, posit creation out of nothing, they do not offer anything like the doctrine later developed by Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. For a superb discussion of the development of this doctrine, see Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

for the persistence of personal identity. Such persistence could be necessary. However, if it is, then we can trust that God will secure these persistence conditions—and God may well do so according to one of the many metaphysical theories that have been developed on this issue.⁶⁰

My motivation for recognizing a theological basis for the persistence of a particular human's existence becomes clearer when we distinguish between what we might call historical existence and narrative existence. On my definition, historical existence simply refers to the causal sequence of events that make up a person's life, whereas narrative existence refers to the history of a person's life as a meaningful story. According to our covenant account of creaturely existence, the historical basis of the creature's existence is not self-subsistent but the realization of the story God elects to tell. As such, most fundamentally, it is the story that God elects to tell that holds all things together (including human existence), not the history of creation (including human lives that persist through time) that holds God's story together. It is of course possible that a part of God's story of creation is that we should have particular lives that persist through time, without any temporal gaps. However, if it is, then, again, it is safe to assume God will ensure there is never any temporal gap in a particular person's historical life.

We should reiterate here, however, that while the particular existence of a person is grounded in and belongs to a story told by God, this does not mean the historical existence of a person is wholly determined by a divine speech-act, for example. For the purpose of covenant relationship, God creates humans to contribute to the shaping of their particular historical lives. In this respect, each person possesses a certain freedom to determine their life direction. As Jon Levenson puts it, 'those who stand under covenantal obligation by nature and necessity are continually called upon to adopt that relationship by free decision'.⁶¹ However, this does not mean people have a role in defining who they are as people of God. It is only according to the covenant framework that people can truly and meaningfully construe what it means to be God's people. Accordingly, Levenson also notes that 'for all the language of choice that characterizes covenant texts, the Hebrew Bible never regards the choice to decline covenant as legitimate. The fact that a choice is given does not make the alternative good or even acceptable, as a proponent of a purely contractual ethic might wish. In fact, the wrong choice results in nothing short of death.'⁶²

What Levenson makes clear here and elsewhere is that no child of the covenant has a voluntary freedom to narrate their true existence for themselves over against

⁶⁰ For an excellent exploration of three major metaphysical theories of how things persist (the endurance, perdurance, and stage theories), see Katherine Hawley, *How Things Persist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶¹ Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 148.

⁶² Levenson, *Creation*, p. 148.

the covenant story in which they find themselves. It is always God who defines the narrative existence of each person, according to God's covenant purposes. Therefore, God always knows the meaning of each person's life far better than they can ever know it for themselves. So, if we want to know who we are, we must look beyond the stories we create for ourselves to the story for which God creates us. Ultimately, to know who we truly are, we must come to know ourselves as we are known by God.

Many of the claims we have put forward in this subsection would benefit from more extensive analysis and elaboration. Such analysis, however, would take us into a discussion of first principles that would distract from our focus on accountability to God. As such, this subsection should primarily be seen as an attempt to lay out some of the underlying premises that will support the more constructive work in the following chapters.

3. Conclusion

We began this chapter by contending that a fundamental part of the theologian's task is to seek to discern the story in which God has placed us and learn what it means to live before God as characters within that story. We then explored the relationship between the divine author and human characters that unfolds in the covenant history of creation. What we developed was a picture of God as a consistently faithful accountant to those accountees who belong to God: as one who judges God's people with a view to delivering them to become all that God creates them to be. Yet we also found that God's covenant relationship with God's people involves a bilateral relationship in which God's people are given space to develop in their own ways, thereby allowing for a reciprocal dimension to the relationship. Nevertheless, we maintained there is a limit to what God's people are able to contribute. While we have an opportunity to participate in God's story in a variety of ways, we are never given the ability to define God's story as co-equal authors or authorities. Moreover, as we shall consider in Chapter 6, to believe we can do so—that we can become an author or authority like God—belongs to the very essence of what it means to live in the shadow of the Fall. To be a fallen creature, to exist in a persistent state of falling away from God, is to be captivated by the fictions we invent for ourselves. It is through the journeys of self-discovery that take place within these fictions that we forget God's story and lose ourselves in the process.

The Fall from Accountability to God

At several points I have suggested that a core feature of human sin is the prioritization of our own judgement of who we are and should be over against God's account of us. To be a sinner is thus to be someone who refuses to embrace accountability to God or, at least, treats accountability to God as subject to one's own judgement. In narrative terms, sin emerges when we choose to source meaning and morality in our own stories over against God's story. In doing so, we deny the meaning and morality intrinsic to our created being in favour of immersing ourselves in our own fictions and fantasies.

To present a case for this view of sin, this chapter will offer a theological reading of the origin story of sin, the Genesis story of the Fall, and show how this story reveals sin be rooted in the fall away from accountability to God. More specifically, in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, I shall argue that the disobedient act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the human resolve to prioritize our own judgement over God's judgement. To do so, we begin with a brief note on our interpretation of the genre of this story. We then discuss what the two trees in this story—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—represent. In short, I contend the tree of life reveals that the garden in Eden is a place of accountability to God, where the fullness of life and flourishing is defined by God's judgement. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by contrast, reveals the deathly possibility of humans rejecting God's judgement in favour of prioritizing their own judgement, grounded in their own autonomy. In the final section of this chapter, we build on our discussion of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by considering what we can learn about accountability to God in light of God prohibiting Adam and Eve from eating of this tree. By the end of this chapter, we should have a clearer understanding of why human life and flourishing are undermined by the decision to reject accountability to God. This will prepare us for thinking about how God draws us back into a relationship of accountability to God, in the following chapters.

1. Interpreting the Genesis Story of the Fall

How did Bonhoeffer and Barth interpret the genre of story of the Fall? For both thinkers, this story represents an origin story that applies to each one of us; it tells

us something true about the history of every human life in this world. Yet neither of them believes this story provides a record of actual events that took place at the beginning of human history. So while this story may speak to the reality of our lives in this world, it does not do so in the way that a scientific textbook might do so. Rather, it offers a poetic representation of a pivotal chapter in the story of our lives before God.

In Barth's terms, the Genesis creation stories are to be associated with the genre of saga, which refers to "'historicised" myth'.¹ More specifically, saga refers to 'an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space'.² On the one hand, it is historical because it really does offer a witness to the history of our lives in this world. For Barth, the creation sagas are intuitive: they are designed (*entworfen*) by God's self-revelation to tell a true story about the world before God. They 'try to say how things actually were'.³ Unlike 'godless myths',⁴ they depend upon God revealing Godself in history: Godself both to the authors of the creation sagas, and also to the readers of these sagas. For Barth, therefore, 'we are no less truly summoned to listen to what the Bible has to say here in the form of saga than to what it has to say in other places in the form of history'.⁵ The Genesis sagas do not simply offer an enchanting fairy tale; they seek to reconstrue realities that are very much a part of our history.

On the other hand, the story is a poetic or mythical rendering of history since it does not directly represent events that actually took place at the beginning of human history. By not being constrained to provide such a record, this story has a greater freedom to speak meaningfully, precisely, and prophetically about aspects of our history in a way a scientific textbook would never do. On this point, Barth quotes Adolf Schlatter approvingly on the role of the biblical authors:

With all the obscurities of his historical hindsight and his prophetic foresight, the biblical narrator is the servant of God, the one who awakens the recollection of him and makes known his will. If he doesn't do it as knower, he does it as dreamer; if his eye should toil, his imagination [*Phantasie*] steps in and fills the gaps as needed. In this way he passes on the divine gift that entered into the course of history and makes it fruitful for posterity. The fact that he has to serve God not only as knower and thinker but also as poet and dreamer is grounded in

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), III/1, p. 87. Hereafter, '*Church Dogmatics*' is abbreviated as 'CD'.

² Barth, CD III/1, p. 81. Garrett Green offers another helpful translation of the first half of Barth's definition of saga: 'an image conceived in visionary-poetic fashion of a concretely unique, spatiotemporally limited, prehistoric temporal reality.' Garrett Green, 'Myth, History, and Imagination: The Creation Narratives in Bible and Theology', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 12, no. 1 (1990): pp. 19–38; quotation from p. 24.

³ Barth, CD III/1, p. 87.

⁴ See 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7.

⁵ Barth, CD III/1, p. 83.

the fact that he is human and we human beings are unable to arrest the transition from thought to poetry.⁶

Bonhoeffer echoes the two sides of Barth's position. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer affirms that in the story of Adam and Eve, 'we remain wholly in the world of pictures, in the world of the magical'.⁷ Yet, on the other hand, he also stresses that the story of the Fall truly represents goings-on in our history. The events of this story, he writes, exist:

at the beginning of history, before history, beyond history, and yet in history; [the decisions this story represents affect] the world; *we ourselves* are the ones who are affected, are intended, are addressed, accused, condemned, expelled; *God, yes God*, is the one who blesses and curses; it is *our* primeval history, truly our own, every individual person's beginning, destiny, guilt, and end.⁸

In short, while Bonhoeffer and Barth recognize that much of the imagery of the story of the Fall is fantastical, they remain adamant that this story represents fundamental truths about what has gone wrong and, indeed, what is going wrong with human life. To understand the central message of this story, as they see it, let us turn our attention to the two trees in the garden and consider what they sought to depict. As Bonhoeffer puts it, the story of Adam and Eve tells us that 'the destiny of humankind is...to be decided in relation to these two trees'.⁹ Put simply, the tree of life speaks to what is right for humanity, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil speaks to what goes wrong.

2. What Does the Tree of Life Tell Us about the Garden in Eden?

For Bonhoeffer and Barth, God, by making the tree of life to grow in the middle of the garden, gives the garden a centre: a heart that is a sign of the life God breathes into the garden. As Bonhoeffer puts it:

The life that comes from God is at the center; that is to say, God who gives life, is at the center. At the center of the world that has been put at Adam's disposal and

⁶ Adolf Schlatter, *Das Christliche Dogma* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1923), p. 337, cited in Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 83. Here we are using Garrett Green's superb translation in 'Myth, History, and Imagination', pp. 28–9.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 3, ed. Martin Rüter, Ilse Tödt, and John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 82.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 82.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 81.

over which Adam has been given dominion is not Adam himself but the tree of divine life. Adam's life comes from the center which is not Adam but God; it revolves around the center constantly, without ever trying to take possession of this center of existence.¹⁰

The arboreal centre of the garden reveals it to be a place where human flourishing revolves around God who, as the author and giver of life, defines what it means to be human. The tree of life indicates that the garden is not a free space where Adam, and then later Eve, are left to become whatever they want to become. Rather, it reveals that it is a place of accountability to God, a place where 'God wills to be recognised, honoured and loved by man'.¹¹ In this respect, Barth writes:

the tree of life occupies the position and fulfils the function which the tabernacle will later occupy in the camp of Israel in the desert, and the temple in Jerusalem in the land which it is promised and given, and the Holiest of Holies in the tabernacle and the temple. Moreover, in the midst of the Garden in the unique place assigned to the tree of life, what is prefigured is that there can and will be only one sanctuary in the holy land and on the whole earth, i.e., that is chosen by God Himself.¹²

So, at the centre of the garden, the tree of life gives form to the garden in the way the tabernacle gives form to Israel's camp in the desert, in the way the temple gives form to Jerusalem, and in the way the holiest of holies gives form to both the tabernacle and the temple. These visible objects communicate that these spaces are places of accountability to God. The tree of life in particular communicates that life is to be found, to cite Bonhoeffer, 'in the unity of unbroken obedience to the Creator—[Adam] has life just because Adam lives from the center of life, and is oriented toward the center of life, without placing Adam's own life at the center'.¹³ As Barth puts it, the tree is a visible sign that tells Adam 'where he is, to whom the place [the garden] belongs, and what he may expect and be'.¹⁴ The tree, therefore, reveals that Adam and Eve must look to the divine accountor to learn about who they are and who they should be according to the shared project of human life, a project God determines and in which Adam and Eve participate. It tells Adam and Eve they do not simply live because they have beating hearts and lungs with which to breathe; they live by virtue of their accountability to God and, therefore, in virtue of God's account of them as persons to whom God gives life. As such, in this

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 83–4.

¹¹ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 282.

¹² Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 282.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 84.

¹⁴ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 256. Barth does not strictly refer to Adam here, but to 'the man' who is later called Adam. However, to keep things simple, we shall refer to 'the man' as Adam.

place of accountability, Adam and Eve become orientated towards their own flourishing when they are orientated towards God's judgement.

3. What Does the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil Tell Us about the Garden in Eden?

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has a very different purpose than the tree of life. As Barth writes, the tree of knowledge 'is not by name or nature the sign... of a reality given to man by God'.¹⁵ Rather, it is 'the warning sign of a possibility which, if realised, will necessarily be the opposite of the life and salvation [that is] promised'.¹⁶ The presence of this tree indicates that 'this place is not without serious problems'.¹⁷ Yet Barth does not think the tree poses a 'threat to man in this arrangement'.¹⁸ By making this tree, God does not turn the garden into a threatening place. As Bill Arnold notes, the garden will remain a place of 'peace and tranquility' so long as Adam is willing 'to hear God's command to stay away from a single tree'.¹⁹ In terms of accountability, the garden continues to be a place of human flourishing so long as Adam embraces God's account of who he is and should be. Nonetheless, the presence of the two trees does make the garden a place where Adam finds himself at a crossroads. Having access to the tree of knowledge indicates that obedience to God is not a foregone conclusion but a possibility Adam must decide to embrace in his relationship of accountability to God. For Barth, the two roads Adam faces prefigure the two roads faced by the people of Israel. As Nathan MacDonald points out:

For both [Adam and the people of Israel] continued existence in the land depends on obedience to the divine law. The presence of the two trees in the garden 'prefigures' (*vorbildet*) the alternative possibilities of Israel's existence: on the one hand, life through the law and the tabernacle, on the other, destruction and ruin. This is the mark of its election.²⁰

To extend this point further, the story of the two trees can be read as a story of the ultimate crossroads facing each of us in this world: either to embrace accountability to God or to deny it.

¹⁵ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 257.

¹⁶ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 270.

¹⁷ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 250.

¹⁸ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 263.

¹⁹ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 59.

²⁰ Nathan MacDonald, 'The *Imago Dei* and Election: Reading Genesis 1:26–8 and Old Testament Scholarship with Karl Barth', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 3 (2008): pp. 303–27; quotation from p. 319.

While God may allow humans to choose between these two possibilities, God is by no means indifferent to whatever humans decide. This is evident from the fact that God determines that embracing accountability to God will lead to life and flourishing, whereas rejecting it will entail death and destruction. The reason God cares about what humans decide, to cite Bonhoeffer, is that God creates humans to have life ‘in a particular way’.²¹ God does not create us to live by a spontaneous freedom, given over to endless possibilities, but to live according to God’s account of who we are and should be. It is only by embracing God’s authority over us, and living according to the judgement of God’s Word, that we can be free to flourish according to how God creates us to flourish, and, therefore, flourish how we are meant to flourish. So, for Bonhoeffer, the human freedom we should associate with human flourishing is a freedom in limitation: a freedom defined and limited by God’s creative purposes. In narrative terms, God creates us to exist as characters in God’s story, according to God’s judgement and definition, rather than as characters in our own stories, left to follow whatever roads beckon us.

Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s account of human freedom here is by no means novel and is one that echoes the theological views of many of the church’s leading thinkers, from the apostle Paul to Kierkegaard, Augustine to Calvin, and Aquinas to Luther. Yet while this may be a standard line, the notion that true human freedom is grounded in God’s judgement rather than human judgement is not all that easy to comprehend, especially if we try to think about it phenomenologically. As we grow older and cease to be like little children,²² we become accustomed to prioritizing our own judgement, to judging the judgement of others based on our own beliefs and commitments—so much so that it is hard to imagine how we could ever allow the judgement of another to take priority over our lives. Furthermore, it may also be difficult to know why we would ever want another to have such authority over us. This is because the autonomy to judge the judgement of others is often seen to be an essential part of human freedom. This is not altogether wrong. While there may be limited ways in which we can experience the flourishing for which God creates us, God does allow us some autonomy to make our own judgements. Indeed, the autonomy of human judgement can be a very good thing.²³ For example, as we discussed in Chapter 4, being able to judge who to trust—that is, to judge who is an (il)legitimate authority—is an important part of practical wisdom. As we considered, being overly trusting of illegitimate authorities is a sure-fire way to be led astray. Indeed, I went so far as to suggest that it can be vicious (i.e. vice-ous) to embrace the judgement of

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 84.

²² See Matt. 18:3; Luke 9:48.

²³ For an excellent discussion of the relationship between accountability as a virtue and healthy forms of human autonomy, see John R. Peteet, Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, and C. Stephen Evans, ‘Accountability as a Key Virtue in Mental Health and Human Flourishing’, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 29 (2022): pp. 49–60 (accompanied by helpful responses from Christian Miller and Michael Laney).

illegitimate authorities, even though the viciousness of illegitimate authorities receives far greater condemnation in Scripture.²⁴

Nonetheless, I have also been arguing that there are theological reasons why human autonomy can become a problem. While there are times when we need to make judgements about the (il)legitimacy of human authorities, there is never a time when we have the authority to judge the (il)legitimacy of God's authority—assuming we truly know that we are confronted with God's authority.²⁵ If God is the ultimate grounding authority, according to whom all other authority is measured and legitimated, then God's authority is always legitimate. There is no higher authority according to which the legitimacy of God's authority can be called into question, which means that God's judgement can never truly be subject to human judgement. Thus, if the autonomy of human judgement leads us to question God's judgement, this will be due to some confusion on our part. It is misguided to think we can ever play a role in judging the value and virtue of God's judgement according to our own lesser criteria. Once again, to judge God in this way would be to treat God as a character in a human story, as one over whom we possess some higher authority. To connect this to our present discussion, such judgement would involve judging God on the basis of our own knowledge of good and evil. For Bonhoeffer and Barth, it is one of the central messages of the story of the Fall that the human move to question God's authority and grasp the knowledge of good and evil for themselves is at the very origin of sin. Before I elaborate on this point, let me briefly mention what unfallen human life might look like, according to Bonhoeffer.

Describing Adam's knowledge prior to eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Bonhoeffer writes, 'Adam cannot know evil, cannot conceive it, and cannot know or conceive death either. But Adam knows the limit of human beings because Adam knows God.'²⁶ Adam, therefore, understands the limits of human life not according to his own moral judgement (with which he limits himself to what he deems good rather than evil), and not according to his own physical judgement (with which he limits himself to what he deems physically life-giving rather than fatal), but primarily according to God's judgement (with which his life is limited according to what God tells him). In his original state, therefore, Adam does not obey God out of some motivation that is extrinsic to his desire and respect for God. He does not primarily obey God because he thinks it is the morally right thing to do (according to his own moral judgement), nor because he thinks it is the physically advantageous thing to do (according to his own biological instincts). Rather, he obeys God simply because he views God as the

²⁴ See Matt. 18:6.

²⁵ There will be times when it is entirely appropriate to make judgements about whether we are really confronted by God's authority. For example, it can be entirely justifiable to question whether someone is genuinely acting in the name of God.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 86.

one who defines the boundaries of his existence. He lives with an unquestioning respect for God's commands that is intrinsic to his relationship with God. And it is in this way that he experiences the fullness of human flourishing, as this includes both moral and physical flourishing when it is properly understood.

So what happens when Adam and Eve choose to disobey God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? There is much debate among biblical scholars and theologians as to what precisely it means for Adam and Eve to gain the knowledge of good and evil.²⁷ Some scholars have interpreted it to mean the acquisition of moral discernment.²⁸ The difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that the author of the Genesis story seems to assume that, in their relationship with God, Adam and Eve have some understanding that they should obey God's command and not eat from the tree of knowledge. Other scholars have interpreted it to mean omniscience. However, there is no indication that one becomes omniscient by eating from the tree.²⁹ The interpretation that Gordon Wenham considers most promising is the interpretation of the knowledge of good and evil as divine wisdom, 'a wisdom that is God's sole preserve, which man should not aspire to attain (e.g., Job 15:7–9, 40; Prov 30:1–4), since a full understanding of God, the universe, and man's place in it is ultimately beyond human comprehension'.³⁰ He continues, 'To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the LORD which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7)'.³¹ W. Malcolm Clark also interprets the knowledge of good and evil as a form of moral autonomy that humans illegitimately take to themselves to distinguish between what is right or wrong, and to do so apart from God's guiding judgement.³²

In many respects, Bonhoeffer's and Barth's interpretation of the knowledge of good and evil resonates with Wenham's and Clark's. For Barth, the knowledge of good and evil entails that we can 'distinguish and therefore judge between what ought to be and ought not to be, between Yes and No, between salvation and perdition, between life and death'.³³ To have this knowledge 'is to be like God, to

²⁷ For a helpful survey of the variety of interpretations of the knowledge of good and evil, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 63–4.

²⁸ See K. Budde, *Die biblische Urgeschichte, Genesis 1–12.5 untersucht* (Gießen, 1883); James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality: The Read-Tuckwell Lectures for 1990* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 62; Ziony Zevit, *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Mark S. Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), pp. 35–64.

²⁹ See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, rev. edn (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 80–1; Howard N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative*, Harvard Semitic Monographs (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 128; Frederick Carl Eiselen, 'The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil', *The Biblical World* 36, no. 2 (1910): pp. 101–12; at p. 104.

³⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, p. 63.

³¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, p. 63.

³² W. Malcolm Clark, 'Legal Background to the Yahwist's Use of "Good and Evil" in Genesis 2–3', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 3 (1969): pp. 266–78.

³³ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 257–8.

be oneself the Creator and Lord of the creature'.³⁴ The problem, however, with humans gaining this knowledge is that, unlike God, humans are not essentially good in and of themselves. So when our knowledge of good and evil is grounded in ourselves rather than God, it takes on a life of its own. This is because our understanding of good and evil is not grounded in what is truly and essentially good but rather in our own arbitrary constructions of meaning. And when we try to live according to these constructions, without a firm grounding in God's holy plan (Isa. 5:19), we continuously fall into confusion; we call good what is objectively evil (i.e. according to God) and call evil what is objectively good (i.e. according to God) (Isa. 5:20).

The question might arise here as to why God could not grant humans at least some autonomy to make up their own minds about what is good and evil. Why could God not let us be coequal authors when it comes to constructing our own meaning and, therefore, our own morality? The answer, quite simply, is because there cannot be a coequal author of creation and its story. As the one who is before all created things and who purposefully brings all created things into existence, God is never less than the ground of all meaning. When God purposefully and intentionally creates the world, everything emerges with an inescapable meaning.

That said, while God may ultimately determine the meaning of all things, God does place us at a crossroads where we have the option to try to construct our own meaning in our lives. Just as parents may allow their children to play make-believe, so also God allows us to create our own fictions and live into them. But there is an important qualification to make here. While it may benefit children to pretend to be something other than they are, it never benefits humans to pretend to be other than who God creates them to be. For Barth and Bonhoeffer, such profane or godless imagining is always a sinful activity.³⁵ It always involves an attempt to reimagine creation according to our own stories, and thereby to try to become like God in a way that serves to displace God as author.

It is because God defines all creation that creatures can only find fulfilment according to God's creative purposes. There just is no competing structure of meaning that truly presents us with an alternative way to live and flourish. As Barth explains with respect to humanity generally and then to Israel specifically:

[God does not envy humanity] the joy of its own choice and therefore its own decision, but because He knows that it can find true joy only in His divine choice

³⁴ Barth, *CD* III/1, p. 258.

³⁵ In making this point, I am not suggesting it is necessarily sinful for humans to pretend to be non-human creatures or objects—for example, when a child pretends to be a donkey for the Christmas nativity play. We could say this is not sinful because God creates humans with a freedom to express themselves in such playful ways. Therefore, a child could pretend to be a donkey without pretending to be something other than God creates them to be. If, however, a human acts in a way that is fundamentally inhuman, by defining oneself in a way that is essentially in tension with God's account of who they are and should be, then this would be sinful.

and decision; that with every act of self-choice and self-justification, with every attempt to understand and to that extent accomplish its own distinction, even if only secondarily, it simply pronounces its own death sentence instead of living in it. . . . The power of the promise given to [Israel] is that its content is the goodness of God, resting on Himself alone and not on anything else. To rejoice in it, Israel had to live on this goodness of His election which has no basis except in God, on the ground of His knowledge of good and evil.³⁶

For Barth, therefore, we have no option but to accept and respond to God's account of who we are and should be, regardless of our own views on the matter. We have no autonomy to judge God's judgement according to our own accounts of who we are and should be. Whenever we pretend we can do this, as Augustine puts it, humanity 'turn[s] to itself with its back to God'.³⁷ In so doing, Barth explains, humanity grasps at the 'possibility of an unheard of exaltation of the creature'.³⁸ In Bonhoeffer's words, humanity 'sit[s] in judgment on God's word instead of simply listening to it and doing it'.³⁹ When this happens, Bonhoeffer elaborates:

[humans believe] on the basis of an idea, a principle, or some prior knowledge of God [and then] pass judgment on the concrete word of God. But where human beings use a principle, an idea of God, as a weapon to fight against the concrete word of God, there they are from the outset already in the right; at that point they have become God's master, they have left the path of obedience, they have withdrawn from being addressed by God. In other words, in this question what is possible is played off against reality, and what is possible undermines what is reality. In the relation of human beings to God, however, there are no possibilities: there is only reality. There is no 'let me first . . .'; there is only commandment and obedience.⁴⁰

So, for Bonhoeffer, as also for Barth, because God creates humanity to participate in such a perfect union, such an intimate relationship with God, there is no space for us to try to judge things in our own terms, according to our own categories, apart from God. Before God, we must come to know ourselves by learning who God knows us to be—according to God's account of who we are and should be. Furthermore, we must also come to know all other things in a way that reflects God's knowledge of them. It is only according to this relationship that we can discover what it truly means to live and flourish. It is on the basis of God's

³⁶ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 270.

³⁷ Augustine, 'On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees', in *On Genesis*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New York City Press, 2013), p. 79.

³⁸ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 258.

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 108–9.

commitment to defining human life and flourishing, and to securing that life and flourishing, that God prohibits Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This prohibition of knowledge, therefore, was an act of love. The idea that prohibiting knowledge can be an act of love is not uncontroversial, so it would be helpful to elaborate on the theological reasoning behind this contention.

4. The Knowledge of Good and Evil as Forbidden Knowledge

As Hud Hudson has pointed out, the notion of forbidden knowledge is likely to prompt a ‘strong and harshly negative reaction’ from many thinkers. Hudson also acknowledges, however, that it is a topic to which such thinkers, upon further reflection, could become more open.⁴¹ Before we discuss how God addresses the problem of humans falling into their own knowledge of good and evil, let us consider briefly why prohibiting knowledge might at times not only be reasonable but also a profoundly loving act.

One of the first things that might come to mind when thinking about forbidden knowledge is the ways in which we prohibit children from developing a knowledge of certain things at a certain age, such as an experiential knowledge of drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, or gambling. This is because we recognize children are not yet able to make appropriate judgements about how to process and employ such knowledge. Yet it is also the case that there are many adults whom society permits to cultivate such experiential knowledge, even though they are also unable to process and employ such knowledge well. Despite the harmful impact that experiential knowledge of drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence have on society, there is a growing resistance to any form of prohibition in favour of a more libertarian approach. As we learn from history, prohibition can create many more problems than it solves—for example, by precipitating the emergence of black markets for illegal activity and banned substances. However, it is not only problems of crime that make people resistant to prohibition. There is also a popular perception that at a certain age—an age sometimes referred to as the age of accountability—human autonomy should be less constrained, and persons should become free to know most things and be able to make their own judgements about how to employ such knowledge.

Nonetheless, there remain ways in which we think it is appropriate to prohibit persons from knowing some things under certain circumstances. It can be a crime to leak classified information. There are times when we do not think it is appropriate to share information with someone—for example, were two

⁴¹ Hud Hudson, ‘Science, Skepticism, Scripture, and Supertasks: Replies to Torrance, Deng, Madueme, Goldschmidt and Lebens’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5 (2017): pp. 637–59; at p. 641.

pilots trying to stop a plane from crashing, that would seem like an especially inopportune time for one pilot to confess to the other that he had been having an affair with his co-pilot's wife. Also, sometimes people will themselves want to forbid certain forms of knowledge from being communicated to them—for example, when they are resistant to hearing spoilers about a film or a book. The reason for prohibiting knowledge in these kinds of situations is that there is an understanding the appropriation of such knowledge will be damaging for the recipient of that knowledge and/or for others who might be harmed as a result of a particular person receiving that knowledge.

While further reflection on the notion of forbidden knowledge may enable us to come up with other times when we deem it appropriate to prohibit knowledge, such examples are likely to be seen as exceptional. Again, there is a general reluctance to think that some forms of knowledge are totally off-limits, that there is some epistemic frontier that should forever remain uncharted. Such resistance is especially evident within the university. While it is true some forms of research are forbidden, the suggestion that certain forms of knowledge should be forbidden will often be viewed as an affront to academic freedom, to the free and open inquiry that is such an important part of human innovation. As James R. Flynn writes, censorship of a viewpoint 'is to claim a prescriptive infallibility, as if you were an omnipotent god-emperor decreeing that something never be heard or weighed by others for the remainder of human history'.⁴²

One of the reasons that many of us are inclined to resist the notion of censorship and forbidden knowledge is the underlying assumption that knowledge itself is never a problem, that knowledge of abstract truths is not itself dangerous. Knowledge only becomes a problem when persons misappropriate it and use it in a way that is dysfunctional. Among the problems with such a view of knowledge is that it neglects the fact that humans are not straightforwardly free to relate to knowledge abstractly, in a neutral way. An experiential knowledge of drugs, alcohol, or gambling can drive people into addiction; pornographic knowledge can lead to the objectification of persons; knowledge that one's co-pilot is having an affair with one's wife can lead to a plane crash. There are endless examples of persons being negatively impacted by knowledge in a way that is unavoidable, and it should not be difficult for most of us to think of instances where it would have been better for us not to learn something. A common example of this would be gossip. Most people will be able to think of a time when they learnt a piece of gossip and then ended up spreading that gossip. If we assume such gossiping is wrong, then it may be reasonable to think it would be better for people not to learn the gossip that would then tempt them to gossip.

⁴² James R. Flynn, *A Book Too Risky to Publish: Free Speech and Universities* (Washington, DC: Academica Press, 2020), p. 9.

This is why some people, when offered the chance of learning a piece of gossip, will respond by saying, 'I don't want to know'.

The basic point here is that the acquisition of certain forms of knowledge can have a corrupting influence. So why are we not better proprietors of knowledge? Why can we not have more control over how we appropriate knowledge? For the apostle Paul, it is because our lives are enslaved to the law of sin, which is at war with the law of God. For Paul, this prompts the question 'Who will rescue me from this body of death?'—and the answer is 'Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Rom. 7:23–5). As we considered earlier in this chapter, the body of death is a body that turns away from the divine source of life by unfittingly taking to itself the knowledge of good and evil. To use Pauline language, this involves a transition from being someone who is animated by the Spirit of God to becoming someone who is animated by the mind of the flesh, whose judgement is guided by natural instinct rather than by faith in God's judgement. It involves a transition from being captivated by the power of God to being captivated by the power of sin.

There is a further clarification that would be helpful to make here. The knowledge of good and evil is not simply an abstract knowledge of the concepts of 'the good' and 'the evil'. Rather, it refers to an epistemic base upon which we distortedly judge what is good and evil, what is right and wrong, in a way that gives primacy to our own judgement over God's judgement. On the surface, it may not obviously appear problematic for us to live according to our confused knowledge of good and evil. One could point out that it does not take faith in God to know that certain things are good or evil in a way compatible with a Christian view of morality. Our innate consciences are widely assumed to be a reliable guide, which explains why many atheists come to similar conclusions as Christians on certain moral questions. Moreover, it could be added that Christians will often appear to be less righteous than many non-Christians. Other possible objections are likely to be raised here, but there are two brief responses to these kinds of objection. First, while an authentic Christian faith should lead to moral growth, it will not immediately lead a person to become sinless, and so the present Christian life can appear every bit as bankrupt as a non-Christian life, perhaps even more so. The second is even more important to grasp. Accountability to God is not simply a means to becoming morally righteous; accountability to God is *fundamental* to the moral life. Again, the value of the Christian life cannot simply be assessed according to how much it facilitates what might generally be recognized as a virtuous life. As Jesus makes clear, the greatest and most fundamental commandment is to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12:30). Theologically speaking, therefore, there is something wrong with an apparently good life grounded in one's own moral judgement rather than God's judgement. Put plainly, if there are two people who appear to lead morally identical lives, and

yet one person is motivated by their own secular judgement, and the other person is motivated by a faith in God's judgement, then the latter person will be characterized by a righteousness in a way the former person is not.

While accountability to God may not simply be a means to a moral life but also an essential feature of it, it is not difficult to show that, apart from God, humans are unreliable judges of good and evil. The limitations of our objective moral judgement—our judgement of what is objectively good or evil—are evident in three respects in particular. First, on an intellectual level, there is a wide range of competing views about what is good and evil. Indeed, most people will change their mind about what is good and evil over the course of their life. Second, on the basis of human desire, we will often want things (i.e. judge them as good on an emotional level) we know we should not want (i.e. judging them as evil on an intellectual level). And third, according to a basic desire, we will often want things (i.e. judge them as good at the instinctual level) we do not want according to a higher-level desire (i.e. that we judge to be evil at the virtuous level). This is why Paul famously asserts in Romans 7 that the natural judgement of the fleshly mind is not only unreliable but also enslaved to human sin in a way that inclines it towards evil. It is for this reason that Christians pray in the Lord's Prayer not to be led into temptation—on the understanding that temptation might lead them to make bad judgements about how to act. It is why Christians will often pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them and give them the strength to make the right judgements. And it is why God's law needs to be written on human hearts, to ensure we not only *know* God's will, but also *will* God's will.

Given the sinful state of human judgement, it seems reasonable to ask the following question: if we had the option to live our lives according to a moral compass that is both reliable and righteous in a way that our natural or fleshly compasses are not, would we pass up this opportunity? Or to reframe this question: if we lived our lives according to a moral compass that was reliable and righteous, would this be something we would want to risk losing? And if we lived in such a paradisaal or heavenly state of morality, would it not make sense to forbid the possibility of our falling into a state where our lives became characterized by moral failure and unrighteousness, where we came to experience all the horrors that we know to exist in such a state? Or, to reframe this question once more: if there were a pill that would lead a child to form the judgement of a psychopath, would we not prohibit them from taking it? What these questions invite is a recognition that there may be understandable reasons as to why God would prohibit us from falling into our own autonomous ways of knowing—given the destruction that such ways of knowing entail—over against living lives defined first and foremost by accountability to God. One thing that should be clear from observing our world, as Nicholas Rescher understates, is that 'there may be some sorts of knowledge that people just cannot handle, destabilizing them to

the point where the knowledge destroys or undermines their ability to function effectively'.⁴³

There are further questions to consider about whether humans should ever be in the business of forbidding knowledge. Such a discussion, however, would take us beyond the scope of this book. The aim of this section is simply to help us see that there are understandable reasons why God might forbid us from forming an epistemic base in the light of which we prioritize our own moral judgement over against God's judgement. To draw on James Flynn's quote from earlier, there are perfectly understandable reasons why God would act as 'an omnipotent god-emperor decreeing that something never be heard or weighed by others for the remainder of human history'.⁴⁴

In view of the problems that follow from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—which follow from us embracing our own moral autonomy—Barth notes that God prohibits Adam and Eve from eating from this tree 'in an act of God's fatherly care'.⁴⁵ Barth also clarifies that when God tells Adam that death will follow from disobeying God's command not to eat from this tree, God is not simply adding 'a threat in order to give the prohibition weight'.⁴⁶ Rather, 'God prohibits because He wants to safeguard man against the threat connected with the doing of what is prohibited'.⁴⁷ God, therefore, is not giving an arbitrary command to humans, but a command that seeks to protect humans from themselves. Death is not simply a punishment for human transgressions but a description of what organically follows from transgressing God's command. Accordingly, Bonhoeffer notes that when humanity turns to embrace the knowledge of good and evil for itself, it ends up 'dead in its own good and in its own evil'.⁴⁸ Under these circumstances, Bonhoeffer elaborates:

humankind lives in a circle; it *lives* out of its own resources; it is alone. Yet *it cannot live*, because in fact it does not live but in this life is dead, because it *must* live, that is, it *must* accomplish life out of its own resources and just that is its death. . . . Humankind now lives only out of its own resources, by its knowledge of good and evil, and thus is dead.⁴⁹

For both Bonhoeffer and Barth, God's commands do not merely speak to a possibility of how humans might live and flourish; they also speak to the only true way for humans to live and flourish. The whole array of God's purposes are life-giving. Just as human life requires blood to flow through human veins, and

⁴³ Nicholas Rescher, *Forbidden Knowledge and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Cognition*, Episteme 13 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Flynn, *A Book Too Risky to Publish*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 259.

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 259.

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 259.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 91 (emphasis original).

oxygen to flow through a person's lungs, so also does true life require humans to live according to God's purposes—to live in accountability to God. Indeed, the only reason humans require blood and oxygen is that God created humans to live embodied lives in this way.

In the following chapters, we shall consider how God sought to return fallen humans back to a life of accountability to God. Before we do so, however, there are two clarificatory points worth making to help tie up our discussion and make the Bonhoefferian and Barthian position I am adopting clearer.

For our first clarification, let us begin by acknowledging this section could appear to be more apologetic than it has a right to be. In much of this section, a case has been made as to why it might be valid for God to forbid the knowledge of good and evil. In so doing, it may well appear that an appeal is being made to a shared human knowledge of good and evil according to which we can judge whether it would be right for God to forbid humans from embracing their own knowledge of good and evil. If this were the main aim of this section, we would be judging God as a character in our own moral story so as to defend or even justify God from the perspective of our own moral categories. Clearly, such a move would express an inconsistency in our reasoning. There is another way, however, to interpret what we have been doing in this section. Rather than offering a defence of a divine prohibition, this section should be read as offering a theological explanation for why it is loving for God to prohibit humans from attaining their own moral autonomy. What makes our explanation theological is that it seeks to reflect the Christian understanding of God as the judge whose commands are grounded in God's love for creatures.

The second main clarification to make about this section, in light of our interpretation of the genre of the story of the Fall as saga, is that our discussion should not be read as offering a defence of a historical event in which God actually prohibited an original human couple from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rather, the purpose of this section is to consider why the acquisition and prioritization of our own moral autonomy is a problematic part of human history, one that is worth forbidding. In short, we have read the story of the Fall as a story that represents the ways in which each of us attempts to escape God's narrative in favour of becoming caught up in our own narratives. The fact that God condemns such escape attempts reveals that God does not create us to be defined primarily by our own autonomy but by our accountability to God.

If God creates us to be human in this particular way, then why does God allow us to fall into lives that are defined by our own autonomy rather than by God's judgement? Or, to ask this in the terms of the Genesis story, why would God provide Adam and Eve with access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil if God intended to prohibit them from eating of it? The basic response to these questions is that the Genesis story does not provide us with an answer. Indeed, one could be justified in thinking there is no clear answer to these kinds of questions

anywhere in Scripture. However, to keep to the Genesis story for now, it seems valid for Gerhard von Rad to contend that speculation over these kinds of questions may be every bit as worthy of prohibition as the knowledge of good and evil itself.⁵⁰ It would seem like something of a misstep to come away from reading the Genesis story of the Fall with the thought that it is appropriate for us now to engage in speculative judgements about why God does what God does, why God allows what God allows, according to our own knowledge of good and evil. As von Rad explains:

Nothing is said to indicate that God combined pedagogical intentions with this prohibition [to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil]. On the contrary, one destroys the essential part of the story with such rationalistic explanations. Man in his original state was completely *subject* to God's command, and the question, 'Who will say to him, What doest thou?' (Job 9.12; Dan. 4.35b) was equally out of place in Paradise.⁵¹

When the problem of evil draws our attention to the very worst of atrocities, it very easily gains the power to agitate, distress, and haunt us. Consequently, we can become absorbed by the problem in a way that awakens a certain admiration for it. This can lead our immediate and often emotional experience of the problem to play a fundamental role in shaping our theology. Indeed, it may lead us to define who we think God must be according to our fraught understanding of the problem—for example, a God who is limited in such a way that God cannot help but allow evil to unfold in the way that it does.⁵² Or it may lead us to come up with solutions to the problem that focus on satisfying our puzzlement at the existence of both God and evil—for example, solutions that point to some good valuable enough to justify God's willingness to allow evil to emerge.⁵³ Among the solutions we might naturally come up with, we are unlikely to find a story about God establishing a covenant relationship with a particular people, and we are perhaps even less likely to find a story about God becoming human, dying on a cross, and being resurrected. Indeed, insofar as these stories fail to explain why God would allow evil to exist, they may not even seem to be satisfactory solutions to the problem of evil as it is typically framed.

But if it is the case that the gospel story—the story of God's victory over sin and evil through Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ—gives us insight into the

⁵⁰ von Rad, *Genesis*, 80–1.

⁵¹ von Rad, *Genesis*, 80–1.

⁵² See, for example, Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

⁵³ The notion of admiring a problem in a way that distracts from a solution is captured superbly in a poem by Langston Hughes, 'Dinner Guest: Me' (1965), where he gives an account of how white people often admire the problem of the evil of racism in a way that distracts them from giving their attention to real solutions.

most important solution to the problem of evil, and if we find this solution unsatisfactory because it fails to address our predominant concerns about the problem of evil, then it seems likely we might be approaching the problem of evil in the wrong way. At the very least, it seems likely we might be giving this problem the wrong kind of attention. That is, rather than thinking about the problem of evil according to the story of God's solution to it, we instead become distracted by arrogating to ourselves the task of explaining how God could allow evil to exist in the first place. Whereas the former story is construed according to God's solution, the latter one is defined by a desire to gain mastery over the problem of evil. As Douglas Campbell writes on this issue, when 'we introduce our account of the problem first and work forwards, rather than introducing the solution first and thinking backward to the implicit definition of the problem, we tell the wrong story'.⁵⁴ That is, rather than seeking to interpret the problem of evil according to the story of God's solution to it, we seek to tell a story about evil into which we can fit God. By so doing, we get things the wrong way around.

5. Conclusion

Central to the argument of this book is that God creates us to be judged according to God's account of who we are and who we should be. In this chapter, we have developed this argument by considering how the origin story of sin can be interpreted as a story of humans falling away from accountability to God into lives that prioritize their own autonomy over against the authority of God. In the final section of this chapter, I closed by suggesting that, if this is a valid theological reading of the Genesis story, then we need to get our priorities straight. When it comes to attending to the problem of sin and evil, we need to make sure we are prioritizing the story of God's solution rather than trying to find our own different sorts of solutions. In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, we shall aim to do precisely this, by thinking about how God seeks to draw us back into the fullness of accountability to God.

⁵⁴ Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), p. 95.

The Fear of the Lord

We learn from the Genesis story that, until Adam and Eve became captivated by the prospect of their own knowledge of good and evil, they lived according to God's knowledge of them. Grounded in God's judgement, their lives were guided by God's account of who they were and should be; they embodied a life of accountability to God. However, in choosing (inexplicably) to prioritize their own moral autonomy, they fell away from accountability to God and descended into a state where they held a greater respect for their own judgement. As we considered in Chapter 6, this story represents our devolution into prioritizing our own moral autonomy over against God's authority. And I argued that this development is at the root of all that is wrong with humanity. Consequently, for things to be made right, we need to relearn to prioritize God's judgement over our own and thereby learn anew the respect that characterizes accountability to God. One of the prominent ways in which this respect is depicted in Scripture is as the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10).

How do we learn this fear? To draw on the language of Baruch 3:7, how does God put the fear of God in our hearts? At certain points in Scripture, this fear is motivated by God threatening and punishing those who disrespect God's authority.¹ At other points, especially in Proverbs, it is prompted by God teaching people about the more organic risks that follow from disrespecting God—for example, the death and wretchedness that naturally follow from rejecting the life and flourishing that come from God.² In both instances, fear is inspired by teaching people about consequences that are extrinsic to their relationship of accountability to God. As such, this fear does not directly concern God but extrinsic consequences associated with disrespecting God's judgement. The authors of the Old Testament interpreted God as inspiring such a fear as a means of teaching Israel respect for God. We see evidence of this in the following prayer from Baruch 3:7–8:

¹ e.g. Deut. 28:15; Jer. 11:3–17; Sir. 2:10–13.

² e.g. Prov. 2; 3:7–10; 11:8; 20:20; 26:27. Theologically speaking, as we shall discuss below, death and wretchedness should not simply be associated with physical death and wretchedness, but also with what we might term a spiritual death and wretchedness—what Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus terms the sickness unto death, based on John 11:4. At various points in Scripture, we find that life and death are not simply construed physically, but are construed theologically in terms of either right relationship with God (life) or alienation from God (death). This is why, for example, there is a sense in which Adam does die when he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as God indicated, and as the Serpent denied.

For you have put the fear of you in our hearts so that we would call upon your name; and we will praise you in our exile, for we have put away from our hearts all the iniquity of our ancestors who sinned against you. See, we are today in our exile where you have scattered us, to be reproached and cursed and punished for all the iniquities of our ancestors, who forsook the Lord our God.

Throughout the history of Israel, divine punishments serve to teach and remind God's people (as a historical whole) that their flourishing and restoration are tied up with their accountability to God.³ As such, they teach God's people to fear consequences that are not only extrinsic but also intrinsic to their relationship with God, which damage their relationship with God. So, on the one hand, there are certainly times when Israel seems to obey God primarily out of a fear of punishments extrinsic to their relationship with God—for example, being handed over to their enemies. On the other hand, there are also times when Israel, having learnt reverence for God, is fearful of disappointing God and being exiled from God's presence—punishments that are intrinsic to their relationship with God.⁴

The fear and respect that are intrinsic to a relationship with God constitute an integral part of expressing the virtue of accountability in relationship with God. It involves people embracing their accountability to God as a good in itself rather than a means to some extrinsic end—that is, a means to avoiding extrinsic punishments or gaining extrinsic rewards. By forming the virtue of accountability, Israel not only shows an interest in the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, but also yearns for a land where they can experience the fullness of God's presence. As such, Israel learns the love that characterizes accountability to God, a love with which they desire to respect God and so fear doing anything to disrespect God. This more mature fear that accompanies a love for God is a sign of Israel growing in their love for God. As Thomas Aquinas notes, quoting Augustine, 'Fear is born of love, since man fears the loss of what he loves'.⁵ Insofar as this fear characterizes the virtue of accountability, it can be considered a virtuous fear, one that bolsters Israel's reverence for God.

To elaborate on some of the points we have just touched upon, we shall now consider the conceptual analysis of fear Aquinas offers in the *Summa Theologica*.⁶

³ e.g. Amos 4:6–12. As Kyle B. Wells explains in reference to the wisdom hymn that follows the words of prayer from Baruch 3:7–8, 'Dead in exile, incompetent Israel will be reconstituted by God as a competent moral agent. The gift of a new heart along with the gift of Torah allows Israel to respond to God and obey unto life.' Kyle B. Wells, *Grace and Agency in Paul and Second Temple Judaism: Interpreting the Transformation of the Heart* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 146.

⁴ Negatively, we might also see this dynamic unfolding in cases of Stockholm syndrome, when a victim forms a certain respect for their abuser.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd edn (1920; New Advent online edn, 2017), II–II.19.22.

⁶ Aquinas's account of fear develops the distinction Augustine draws between servile fear, based on law, and chaste, holy, or reverential fear, based on God's kindness, in *City of God* 21.25. It also echoes elements of Saint Benedict's discussion of fear in Chapter 7 of *The Rule of Benedict* (New York: Penguin, 2008). For a helpful discussion of Augustine's account of the fear of the Lord, see John

What is particularly relevant for our purposes is the distinction Aquinas draws between servile fear and filial fear—with the latter being a fear that closely connects with the virtue of accountability. Following this discussion, we shall then consider the limits of fear. More specifically, I shall argue that the fear of the Lord must only be viewed as a derivative expression of a person's participation in a relationship of accountability to God. This is because, in a relationship of accountability to God, it is God—and not simply the disposition of the human subject—who empowers a person to embrace their accountability to God.

1. Aquinas on Fear

For Aquinas, when a person's life is rightly oriented towards God, fear is both an essential feature of the virtuous life and a critical motivator for teaching persons to become virtuous. Yet Aquinas was also aware that fear can, at times, end up hindering the virtuous life—for example, when it leads persons to become afraid to become all that God creates us to be. As such, he understood that learning how to negotiate fear was a critical part of human flourishing. To help us understand the nature of fear and how to manage it, Aquinas offers a detailed conceptual analysis of fear and its variants in the *Summa Theologica*, which is highly pertinent to our discussion of the virtue of accountability.

1.1 Aquinas on worldly fear

In his reflection on fear, Aquinas distinguishes between worldly fear and the fear of God. Worldly fear is the fear of the person who is excessively and improperly devoted towards finite worldly ends, leading them to become overly fearful about worldly concerns such as poor health, death, poverty, and social rejection. To be clear, Aquinas does not think such concerns are necessarily problematic. They can be 'suitable to our nature';⁷ it is natural to want to be healthy, financially stable, and an accepted member of a community. Indeed, he is happy to recognize that a certain amount of success in these areas is integral to human flourishing. Such concerns only become improper if they compete with a person's fear of God. This happens, for example, when fear of death leads a person to deny God to avoid martyrdom, when fear of poverty holds a person back from fulfilling God's calling

Sehorn, 'Threading the Needle: Fear of the Lord and the Incarnation in St Augustine', in *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ann W. Astell (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. 76–101; see also Section 2 of the present chapter. On Benedict's view, see Catherine Rose Cavadini, 'Lips of Fear Kissed by Mercy: Expositions of *Timor Dei* in Cistercian Commentary on the Song of Songs', in *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ann W. Astell (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. 105–24.

⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II.42.3.

to give away one's wealth to help those in need, or when fear of social isolation leads a person to compromise their faith in order to find favour with their peers. In each of these instances, worldly fears generate a cowardice that prevents a person from becoming all that God calls them to be. It indicates, therefore, that a person's love for the (immediate comforts of the) world exceeds their love for God. It also signals that they are more beholden to their own instinctual account of flourishing, and their ability to generate it, than they are to God's account of flourishing and God's ability to provide for it. Put another way, it is a sign that a person places more trust in their own control and authority over their life than in God's governance, even to the point where they feel a need to act against God's guidance to secure their flourishing.⁸ In contrast, when a person surrenders to God and finds security and assurance in the providential love of God, their worldly fears become of secondary concern such that they do not interfere with their accountability to God. It is against the distraction of worldly fears that the theological command "Do not be afraid" is given, which is the most repeated command in the Bible.

When it comes to thinking specifically about the fear of God rather than worldly fear, Aquinas draws a further distinction between what he calls filial fear and servile fear. Both of these fears are grounded in a faith in God. Filial fear, however, is the more mature form of fear, and is characteristic of faith in a way servile fear is not. As I shall now argue, it is filial fear that is a feature of the virtue of accountability—the virtuous fear that was mentioned earlier.

1.2 Aquinas on servile fear

What precisely is servile fear? The person characterized by servile fear, for Aquinas, is primarily motivated by 'fear of punishment'.⁹ This is the fear of a servant for his master 'based on the power which the master exercises over the servant'.¹⁰ It is also the fear of the punishment God threatens against those who disobey God, which we find throughout Scripture. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, this threat serves to deter persons from disobedience so they might draw closer to God and develop a deeper respect for God.¹¹ When God uses servile fear, for Aquinas, it is to motivate persons to learn obedience to God. While a person may, at first, choose to obey God out of fear of punishment, by repeatedly obeying God, obedience can become so natural for them that they desire to obey

⁸ Robert Adams makes this point about a person's lust for control in his essay "The Virtue of Faith", *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1984): pp. 3–15; at pp. 11–12.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.2.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.2.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.2.

God irrespective of the threat of punishment.¹² By teaching persons in this way, servile fear not only disciplines persons into acting obediently, but it can also shape them to become obedient persons who embrace accountability to God as a good in itself and who are therefore disposed to respect God.

There is, however, only so much that servile fear can teach a person. A person cannot, for example, be scared into believing there is a God who will judge and punish them. If a person does not believe in God, then they will not fear what God might or might not do to them.¹³ As such, Aquinas views servile fear as ‘a gift of the Holy Ghost’ which accompanies the gift of faith.¹⁴ By evoking a person’s natural fears—rather than miraculously awakening an overwhelming respect for God—the Holy Spirit works with human nature to transform a person’s mind and orient them towards God.

To understand the nature of servile fear better, there is something else to clarify here, which we touched upon in the introduction to this chapter. That is, the object of servile fear is not God per se but the consequences extrinsic to their relationship with God. For example, consider the following verse: ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell’ (Matt. 10:28). In this verse, Jesus calls persons to fear God not by appealing to a person’s relationship to God per se, but to their relationship to themselves and their own self-preservation.

In response to this clarification—that the object of servile fear is not God per se but what God might bring about—a valid objection could be raised. Normally when we say that we fear someone, it is because we fear what that person might or might not do to us. The reason it can be valid to associate fear with a person is that a person’s fear-inspiring (in)actions can be seen as a reflection of who they are—a tree is known by its fruit. So, for example, we can fear a bully because a bully can be fairly interpreted as someone who is out to harm us. Yet there are also instances when a person can fear someone based on a misinterpretation or, at least, a superficial interpretation of who they are in relation to their actions. For example, children may initially fear a good teacher because, from a child’s immediate perspective, the teacher is someone who inflicts harm on them by way of detention if they do not do their homework. Based on this initial perception of a teacher, children are motivated to do their homework. Such a perception, however, is a result of the children’s inability to see the bigger picture, according to which the teacher threatens detention for the sake of their flourishing—for the sake of supporting the children’s goal of becoming educated. If the children were able to grasp (1) that education is crucial to their flourishing, and (2) that the teacher is

¹² The development of a person’s motivations from obeying God out of a fear of punishment to obeying God out of love of Christ is also evident in Benedict’s account of the ascent to humility. Benedict, *Rule of Benedict*, pp. 22–6.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.7.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.6.

wholly committed to helping them to flourish, then they would not fear the teacher primarily as an agent of harm—for example, as a giver of detentions. However, until children grasp these points, a teacher might need to motivate the child by appealing to their more immature understanding of flourishing, according to which the free time detention undermines is perceived to be more valuable than education.

The case of children's initial fear of a teacher is comparable to a person's servile fear of God. Initially, for Aquinas, when a person is unable to appreciate the true flourishing God seeks for them, they might fear God, for example, as one who can send persons to hell. If, however, they could see the bigger picture, they would be able to see that hell is a threat used in Scripture to encourage persons to pursue lives characterized by the flourishing for which God creates them. This is not to suggest the prospect of hell is an empty threat. To persistently reject God is to live a life oriented towards damnation. However, even if God allows a person to fall into hell, this does not necessarily mean God is no longer committed to a person's flourishing. Eleonore Stump, for example, suggests that sending persons to hell:

prevents their further disintegration, their further loss of goodness and being. [God] cannot increase or fulfill the being of the damned; but by putting restraints on the evil they can do, he can maximize their being by keeping them from additional decay.¹⁵

If it is the case that, according to the larger narrative of creation, God is committed to human flourishing, then any fear that God seeks to harm us (e.g. for the sake of fulfilling some kind of divine justice) will be based on a misunderstanding of human accountability to God. That is, it will be based on a misunderstanding of (1) the role God plays as the ultimate accountor, and (2) the true nature of human flourishing. Such a misunderstanding is very common among fallen humans; indeed, it is a feature of the sin that affects us all. This is why, for example, it is so challenging for Christians to take up their crosses and follow Christ. Failure on this front expresses an inability to (1) perceive Christ as an authority who calls people to true life and flourishing, and (2) recognize that true flourishing is found by following Christ. With such failure, Christians function as though the cost of following Christ outweighs the benefits intrinsic to a life of discipleship. It is because of such misjudgement that obedience to God is encouraged not only by appealing to the benefits intrinsic to the relationship with God, but also by appealing to extrinsic benefits. Again, for example, in the history of Israel, the

¹⁵ Eleonore Stump, 'Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (1986): pp. 181–98; quotation from pp. 196–7. For further discussion of this point in relation to Aquinas's view of hell, see also Michael Potts, 'Aquinas, Hell, and the Resurrection of the Damned', *Faith and Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (1998): pp. 341–51.

prophets would frequently appeal to the human desire for physical flourishing in order to inspire obedience to God—for example, by inspiring a servile fear of physical punishments extrinsic to their relationship with God.

In sum, when a person obeys God out of servile fear, their fear is not motivated by love or respect for God. Rather, as Aquinas notes, servile fear ‘proceeds from self-love, because it is fear of punishment which is detrimental to one’s own good’.¹⁶ Servile fear, therefore, is not a defining feature of the virtue of accountability that characterizes the person who embraces their accountability to God. Indeed, as C. Stephen Evans and Brandon Rickabaugh point out, ‘someone who is accountable only out of fear of sanctions lacks the virtue of accountability, because such a person does not welcome being accountable, but rather feels constrained to be accountable by the sanctions’.¹⁷

1.3 Aquinas on filial fear

How does Aquinas understand the more mature fear of God, which he refers to as filial fear? This is the kind of fear that accompanies a son’s love for his father, ‘based on the son’s affection towards his father to whom he submits himself’.¹⁸ It is motivated by a child’s love and respect for their father and a desire not to disappoint him, rather than by a fear of being punished. For Aquinas, this is the fear we have of God when we come to know God the Father’s love for us, when we receive the Spirit of adoption and thereby cry ‘Abba! Father!’ (citing Rom. 8:15).¹⁹ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung helpfully distinguishes servile fear from filial fear: ‘While both types of fear can motivate obedience, servile fear... involves wanting to maintain a safe distance from God, in virtue of his power to punish, whereas filial fear results from not wanting to do anything that would distance oneself from him.’²⁰ Like servile fear, filial fear is rooted in a person’s faith in God. But unlike servile fear, filial fear is grounded in a living and loving faith, whereas servile fear is grounded in a lifeless faith. Aquinas writes:

[Faith] is also the cause of filial fear, whereby one dreads to be separated from God, or whereby one shrinks from equalling oneself to Him, and holds Him in reverence, inasmuch as faith makes us appreciate God as an unfathomable and supreme good, separation from which is the greatest evil, and to which it is

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.6; see 1 John 4:18.

¹⁷ C. Stephen Evans and Brandon Rickabaugh, ‘Living Accountably: Accountability as a Virtue’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2022): pp. 45–64; quotation from pp. 50–1.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.2.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II.19.2.

²⁰ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, ‘Holy Fear’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2012): pp. 1–22; quotation from p. 16.

wicked to wish to be equalled. Of the first fear, viz. servile fear, lifeless faith²¹ is the cause, while living faith is the cause of the second, viz. filial fear, because it makes man adhere to God and to be subject to Him by charity [i.e. by a love for God].²²

It follows from this passage that a person with a filial fear of God, as opposed to a servile fear, will be more fearful of falling short of God's account of who they should be than they are of falling short of their own (immature) account of their ideal self. As Andrew Pinsent writes, on Aquinas's view, the gift of filial fear 'disposes one to shrink from separation from God, not from the point of view of one's own good as desired by oneself, but from the point of view of one's own good as desired by God with whom one is united by *caritas*'.²³ In this respect, filial fear is a disposition that characterizes someone who exhibits the virtue of accountability to God.²⁴ This does not mean, however, that filial fear is identical with the virtue of accountability, even though the two are closely connected. The difference between them is that whereas the virtue of accountability involves a commitment to accountability to God, filial fear involves a fear of not being sufficiently accountable to God. And whereas a person cannot have filial fear without the virtue of accountability, it is at least possible for them to have the virtue of accountability without filial fear—for example, if they are so confident in their commitment to accountability that they have no fear of doing anything to undermine it.

While Aquinas affirms that filial fear disposes a person to be primarily concerned with their own good as desired by God—rather than with their own good as desired by themselves—we also need to be clear that these two concerns need not be competitive. When a person is characterized by the virtue of accountability, the flourishing a person desires will correspond to the flourishing God desires for them. This is the case in two respects. First, the person with the virtue of accountability experiences flourishing by participating in a relationship of accountability to God, since such accountability is essential to human flourishing. Second, they flourish *by way of* participating in this relationship, since God is the

²¹ By 'lifeless faith', Aquinas is referring to a non-virtuous faith that is grounded in sinful motivations and, therefore, not directly motivated by charity—that is, by a love for the divine source of life. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.4.5.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.7.1.

²³ Andrew Pinsent, 'The Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 487 n. 30.

²⁴ This point is made by C. Stephen Evans in his article 'Accountability and the Fear of the Lord', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34, no. 3 (2021): pp. 316–23. It also resonates with Philip Michael Lasater's view that, broadly speaking, the fear of God motif in the Hebrew Bible is a 'way to articulate human beings' proper position and approach before that which qualifies as great, authoritative, superior, and even transcendent'—that is, before 'Yhwh—the one at the top of a cosmic hierarchy'. Phillip Michael Lasater, *Facets of Fear: The Fear of God in Exilic and Post-Exilic Contexts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), pp. 223, 220.

ultimate accountor when it comes to the shared project of human flourishing and, as such, is committed to helping humans become all that God creates them to be within the God-human relationship of accountability. By loving God, as Aquinas puts it, 'one loves all that God loves, including oneself'.²⁵ Put another way, by fearing God, one also fears all that God opposes, including that which compromises human flourishing. In making this point, Aquinas echoes a point made by the author of Proverbs, that 'the fear of the LORD is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm' (Prov. 19:23). That is to say, when a person embraces God's authority, they can see there is ultimately no other harmful power to fear that can compete with God's life-giving grace. 'If God is for us, who is against us?' (Rom. 8:31).

While it is not difficult to make a theological case that fearing God serves human flourishing, this does not mean it is easy to appreciate that embracing accountability to God will be best for us. Again, from our immediate perspective, it can be very hard to grasp how fear of God is life-giving. This point is particularly evident for the person who, in being characterized by the virtue of accountability to God and a filial fear of God, is led into suffering and martyrdom. One way to address this difficulty is by stressing that the flourishing and vitality that come from following God is primarily eschatological, that we will only truly be able to experience this flourishing in the next life. The risk with this response, however, is that it neglects the many ways in which Scripture presents accountability to God as a relationship that generates flourishing and vitality in *this* life. It neglects the fact that the life and flourishing that characterize the person who embraces their accountability to God is not simply located in the eschaton, when a person is resurrected from the dead, but is teleologically concerned with human flourishing in this life. How can this be?

Throughout Scripture, we find that human life involves more than biological flourishing—more than having a beating heart and breathing lungs. We saw this in our discussion of Genesis in Chapter 6, and we can also see this point being made in numerous places in the New Testament. For example, the Gospel of Matthew quotes Jesus's paradoxical phrase in 10:39, 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'. Or, as Jesus repeats in 16:25, 'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'. Later, in 19:17, Jesus associates life with obedience when he says, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments.' We can also find similar passages in the other synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke. Further, if we turn to 1 John, we find John saying, 'Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life' (5:12). And at several points in this letter, we

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.19.6.

find life does not simply refer to biological life but to a life breathed into us by the Spirit uniting us with Christ. What each of these passages indicates is that the fullness of human life is not simply given to us by our biology but by a relationship with the ultimate source of life—the God who is the very reason we experience life in embodied ways. The relevant point here is that, in a relation of accountability to God, there is an end for human accountees far greater than the persistence of physical life and flourishing, and that is *spiritual* life and flourishing. There is something far greater to be feared than physical death and suffering, and that is spiritual death and suffering.

A relevant point worth re-emphasizing here is that, in relationships of accountability, there may be times when an accountant has an objective account of an accountee's ends which the accountee is not yet able to appreciate for themselves subjectively. This point is especially true when thinking about accountability to God. In relationship to God, the virtue of accountability will require us to trust and respect that God knows what is best for us, beyond what we can immediately see for ourselves. When the prospective martyr is motivated by their accountability to God, for example, they can trust that, according to God's story (rather than some alternative human story), martyrdom can be more expressive of flourishing (i.e. of being who God creates them to be) than a life that persists physically on the basis of denying God. As Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung writes, 'Love for God gives us power and possibility beyond our own imagining, even in the face of the worst sort of fear. Great love can conquer great fear. Love is power.'²⁶ That is, the love and respect that characterize a filial fear of God will lead us to follow God into conforming to a higher form of life and flourishing which is beyond what we can grasp subjectively, and which, when fully grasped, is able to deliver us from being overly or improperly fearful of suffering and death. So while a fear of God will not deliver us from any harm that might befall us in the immediate present, it does lead us down a path in which 'all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom. 8:28). The fear of God puts everything else into perspective such that, by knowing that the greatest authority and power lie with the God who is love, a person can know that, relatively speaking, there is nothing else to fear.

2. The Limits of Fear

Having stressed the important role the fear of the Lord can play in relationships of accountability, let us now say something about its limits. Central to the argument of this book is the notion that accountability to God is grounded in a person's

²⁶ DeYoung, 'Holy Fear', p. 18.

participation in God's story of the world. This correlates with another key argument: that a core element of sin is the human disposition to treat God as a character in a story we conceive about the world. So, while we can recognize that fearing God, properly understood, is a valuable part of life before God, it is imperative this emphasis not become the defining feature of how we think about God's story. That is, we must resist the pull to treat God as a character in a religious, existential, or sociological story about the fear of God; we must not reduce our relationship with God to one grounded in our own fearful disposition, virtuous or otherwise.²⁷ The fear of God is but a derivative characteristic of a sinner being drawn (or perhaps dragged) to play a positive role in the reality of God's story of creation.

So how might we resist the inclination to see ourselves as the ultimate authors of our religious stories, whether they be stories of fear or anything else? We should first acknowledge that we cannot avoid this inclination altogether, at least in our present lives. As we endeavour to make sense of the world from our first-person perspective, caught up in our own worlds of meaning, there will inevitably be ways in which we treat God as a character in one of our stories. Nonetheless, it is possible for our narration to become more aligned with God's story so we can learn to embrace and live into truer religious stories—human stories that derive from God's story and witness to it in a way fitting for humans. For this to take place, our storytelling must be guided and transformed by the power of the triune storyteller. This happens by God the Father speaking to us through the incarnate Son. As the Gospel of John depicts this movement, the Father is made known through God's Word becoming flesh, and this Word serves as the way, the truth, and the life—the one who brings us to the Father.²⁸ We receive this Word by the Holy Spirit giving us the mind of Christ, thereby sweeping us up in the Christological story of creation. As such, we are not left to our own devices to learn the meaning of God's story. Rather, the triune God draws us into God's story, delivering us into a new realm of meaning wherein we can begin to know ourselves as we are known by God—as characters in God's story.

There will be more to say about Trinitarian incorporation into God's story in the following chapters. For now, however, let us relate this point to the focus of this chapter. Following on from what I have just said, in order to understand what it means to experience the fear of the Lord in a way that generates wisdom, we cannot simply look to how our own subjective fear disposes us towards God and

²⁷ A famous work that comes close to treating God as a character in a religious (if not an existential) story about the fear of God is Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. For further discussion of Kierkegaard's account of the religious category of existence with brief reference to *Fear and Trembling*, see my book *The Freedom to Become a Christian: A Kierkegaardian Account of Human Transformation in Relationship with God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 86–95. A work that openly treats God as a character in a sociological story about the fear of God is Dominic Johnson's *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁸ Jn. 1:14–18; 14:6; see also Jn. 1:1–13; 3:31–5; 5:19–29; 17:20–6.

God's story. Rather, we must think about the fear of the Lord as a sign of encountering God's meaningful presence in a way that actively positions us in God's story. It is a sign we are actively participating in a Trinitarian context where we are effectively surrounded by the power of the Holy Spirit communicating the meaning of God's Word. And it is a sign of participating in an environment where we are dispossessed of a purely immanent sense of meaning and where theological meaning is bestowed upon us in its place—where our false self-constructing autonomy is countered by God revealing who we truly are and should be according to God's story.

One of the earliest and most prominent theologians to have really grasped this point is Augustine. His *Confessions*, for example, is particularly well known as a work that sought to interpret the human story within God's story. In this work, as Brian Stock writes, Augustine offers 'a dependent notion of the self based on biblical teachings, in particular those of Paul', which replaces Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Stoic accounts of the self 'which stress the autonomy of the self'.²⁹ Kent Dunnington also beautifully captures the aim of the *Confessions* when he writes:

The form of the *Confessions* in general is meant to challenge the notion that we can truthfully tell the story of who we are—of our true selves—abstracted from God. . . . It is not simply that Augustine needs to give thanks for what God has helped him discover and accomplish; rather Augustine does not believe there is a 'self' he can truthfully identify abstracted from his ongoing journey to God. . . . The self is an ecstatic project, known only through relationship, which is to say, through service, prayer, and worship.³⁰

What makes Augustine's approach especially relevant to this chapter is that, at various points in his writings, he considers how we might think about the fear of the Lord in the context of God's story. Furthermore, his account of this fear was foundational to Aquinas's view. While Augustine only briefly refers to the fear of the Lord in the *Confessions*, he does give this theme closer attention elsewhere, especially in his *Exposition of the Psalms*, albeit in a way that resonates with his theological approach to narrative in the *Confessions*. What we find in the *Exposition of the Psalms* is a Christological account of holy or chaste fear of the Lord. As John Sehorn demonstrates, Augustine held that God does not leave us to fear God in and of ourselves. Rather, in and through Christ, God descends into the fearfulness of our situation so we might learn to fear God with God and thereby

²⁹ Brian Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 121.

³⁰ Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 39.

ascend from fear into the wisdom of God.³¹ This is a part of what Augustine refers to as the ‘wonderful exchange’ (*admirabile commercium*):

[Christ] came to receive insults and give honors, he came to drain the cup of suffering and give salvation, he came to undergo death and give life. Facing death, then, he was afraid, not in himself but in us. When he said that his soul was sorrowful to the point of death, we all unquestioningly said it with him. Without him, we are nothing, but in him we too are Christ. Why? Because the whole Christ is head and body.³²

After quoting this passage, Sehorn quotes another passage from Augustine:

Fear springs from human weakness, hope from the divine promise. Your fear is your own, your hope is God’s gift in you. In your fear you know yourself better, so that once you are set free you may glorify him who made you. Let human weakness be afraid, then, for divine mercy does not desert us in our fear.³³

We can defer to Sehorn’s chapter for a closer examination of Augustine’s Christological understanding of fear. But what is especially relevant for our discussion is Augustine’s resistance to any approach that reduces the fear of the Lord to something that can be defined simply according to the inward existence of the religious believer—for example, as the appropriate disposition of the religious believer towards a transcendent judge. For Augustine, ‘the Lord’s eyes are upon those who revere him and trust in his mercy, not in their own merits or their virtue . . . but in his mercy’.³⁴ It is only by the grace and mercy of God, mediated in and through Christ, that our fear can truly become oriented towards God. Apart from Christ, human fear does not dispose us towards God but draws our attention inwards, into the experience of our own weakness before God, and thus into our own inability to approach God. In and through Christ, however, God assumes our humanity, so that, together with Christ, we need no longer fear the ways in which we distance ourselves from God. Again, this is because, with Christ, we do not simply fear God from afar, but we fear God with God. This point speaks to the fact that the gospel story is not a story of us for God, but of God for us—and, furthermore, of God for us so that, in and through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be for God. It is by participating in Christ and experiencing the power of the Spirit that our fear of God is united with God’s wisdom, thereby enabling our fear to be ‘the beginning of wisdom’.

³¹ Sehorn, ‘Threading the Needle’, pp. 76–101.

³² Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms 1–32*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 30(2).3, cited in Sehorn, ‘Threading the Needle’, p. 89.

³³ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*, 30(2).3, cited in Sehorn, ‘Threading the Needle’, pp. 89–90.

³⁴ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*, 32(3).24.

How might we conceptualize this new and redeemed fear? Like any redeemed element of human existence, this is not something easily put into universally accessible words. Holy fear carries a spiritual meaning that must be learnt by experiencing God's revelation in and through the life of the church—the place where we can expect to experience and perceive the meaning of revelation. Furthermore, like the virtue of accountability, holy fear is a disposition that will be experienced distinctively by different people according to their unique existence and the particular roles to which God calls them. Yet, at the same time, this does not mean there is nothing for us to say. It is not the case, for example, that the spiritual experience of revelation makes biblical descriptions of the fear of the Lord meaningless; nor does it evacuate all meaning from Augustine's and Aquinas's accounts of holy fear. What the experience of revelation does is give us the eyes to see and ears to hear in a way that enables us to perceive a fuller meaning than can be garnered from written descriptions alone. It does this by helping us to refer truly to God as the object of our fear rather than to some fictional deity housed within our own stories. It also exposes us to the power of God's judgement that puts salutary pressure on us in a way that guides us into wisdom, thereby making us better interpreters of Scripture and the theological tradition. Furthermore, it awakens our intuitions to the particular ways in which God guides each of us in line with Scripture and the church's later teachings. So the experience of revelation does not detract from the need for careful theological reflection but serves to elevate it into a form of faith seeking understanding. By so doing, it makes the theologian—the one who seeks to study God and all things in relation to God—more successful in their task. This is because the revelatory power of God gives theologians a proper footing and orientation, mobilizing them to become witnesses to God's self-revelation and mission to the world, and making them voices for the church today.

When holy fear is understood in the context of the reality of revelation—in an environment where the redemptive power of revelation can be experienced—it should be accompanied by a concern lest our internal dispositions and narratives distort and cloud the meaning God is communicating to us. Practically speaking, the primary way for this concern to be addressed is by seeking those activities, places, and people which we recognize to be conducive to experiencing God's revelation. In particular, holy fear should motivate us to engage in those ecclesial activities (e.g. prayer, reading Scripture, liturgical worship, obedience), participate in those ecclesial spaces (e.g. church services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and maybe even theology classrooms), and form relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, through whom and through which God draws us to see God's story in a way that counters our false narratives. In sum, according to the Augustinian view we are adopting here, the fear of God should not be understood as a disposition with which we can elevate ourselves towards a state of wisdom. Quite the contrary: it is a disposition that makes us fear the ways in which we lead

ourselves away from God and the wisdom that comes from God's revelation. Holy fear should be a means whereby we are drawn into the life of the body of Christ to seek the Holy Spirit, through whom we might be nurtured into wisdom.

In philosophical terms, what I am positing here is a unique form of semantic externalism: a theological semantic externalism. We do not have space here to offer a detailed account of this view, so let us briefly raise a couple of points that are relevant to our discussion, especially in preparation for Chapters 8 and 9. Generally speaking, as Jesper Kallestrup describes, semantic externalism is the view 'that the meanings of referring terms, and the contents of beliefs that are expressed by those terms, are not fully determined by factors internal to the speaker but are instead bound up with the environment'.³⁵ Theologically speaking, we can take semantic externalism to be the view that the true meaning of referring terms, and the contents of beliefs expressed by those terms, are not fully determined by factors internal to the speaker but are instead determined by the external God.³⁶ So, for example, God is the external authority who fixes the referent of words such as faith, hope, love, goodness, truth, and fear. Furthermore, it also implies the meaning of our lives—that is, how we conceptualize them—is dependent on the (external) authority of God. In order to know the truest and fullest meaning of things requires a meaning-bestowing relationship with God through which we can begin to know things as they are known by God. The full meaning of creation is transmitted by the Spirit such that persons come to share in the mind of Christ. This enables them to grow in the wisdom and understanding that corresponds to God's story. This transformative relationship with God is experienced through the life of the church, where God's story is embodied, revealed, and experienced. When a person is isolated from God's story and left to their own internal devices, they end up in what Jessica Brown refers to as a 'no-reference situation' wherein 'the subject is not suitably related to an object or kind to think about that object or kind'.³⁷ That is, they fall into their own fallen stories wherein they lack any inherent capacity to refer to God's story. Locked in their fictional world, a person is dependent on the Holy Spirit, and those through whom the Spirit works, to set them free for participation in the body of Christ so they can experience the power of revelation that draws them into God's story.

³⁵ Jesper Kallestrup, *Semantic Externalism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. i.

³⁶ The question might arise here as to why we cannot go so far as to say that true meaning of referring terms, and the contents of beliefs expressed by those terms, are fully determined by the external God. As we noted in Chapter 5, the meaning of an actualized feature of creation is not identical to the meaning of that feature as it is known by God. Creation is not identical to God's eternal knowledge of creation. The meaning of a created thing is therefore determined by its concrete existence together with the meaning given it by the mind of God. While God is the ground of creation, and defines all creation, the act of creation out of nothing entails that something entirely new, with new meaning, comes into existence.

³⁷ Jessica Brown, *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 147.

3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered an analysis of the fear of the Lord as a concept that closely connects with the virtue of accountability. As we saw in our engagement with Aquinas and then Augustine, the fear of the Lord is not only a major theme in Scripture, but also one that has been developed within the theological tradition in ways pertinent to our discussion of accountability. Following our analysis of the fear of the Lord as a disposition accompanying the virtue of accountability (to God), I went on to say something about its limits. I argued that while the fear of the Lord can play an important role in our journey into God's story, it should not be understood as anything more than a secondary expression of our participation in this story. It must never inspire a story of its own in such a way that we define ourselves according to our fear of God. Instead, it should dispose us towards God so that God might draw us into God's story. In making this point, I argued that the true meaning of our lives is not something we are equipped to discover internally but something we must be given to know in a meaning-bestowing relationship with God.

From what I have argued in this chapter, it follows that one of the greatest fears that accompanies accountability to God is not the prospect of failing to secure what we (immediately) want, but of failing to obtain what God wants for us—of missing out on the fulfilment of God's purposes for creation. The hope that accompanies this fear, therefore, does not aspire to God bringing our own sin-inspired stories to their fulfilment—that is, God's fulfilling those dreams and ambitions that emerge from the stories we tell ourselves apart from God. Rather, true hope aspires to the fulfilment found by sharing in the story for which God creates us, a story far greater than any story we could even begin to imagine, let alone construct. Since this is not a story we can capture for ourselves, our hope must be placed in those ways in which God draws us into this story. As I briefly mentioned in this chapter, this is to be found in and through the life of the church. To elaborate on this point, Chapter 8 will focus on a person's initiation into the ecclesial life of accountability through baptism.

Baptism into Accountability in Christ

In a relationship of accountability, an accountee will often be given a title that identifies them with their role in that relationship. For example, when someone is described as a ‘student’, this can speak to their accountability to a teacher; or, indeed, when someone is described as a ‘teacher’, this may speak to their accountability to a student. By taking on such a descriptor, the accountee is recognized as having certain obligations to an accountor according to the shared project that defines their relationship—for example, education. It is then the task of the accountor to judge the accountee according to their title in a way that helps them to fulfil their role.

On some occasions, an accountee will take on a title by way of a ceremony. For example, in a wedding ceremony, a couple will make vows to each other that initiate them into a covenant of marriage wherein they become newly accountable to each other. In response to their vows, the pastor will then normally issue a performative which intimates their new status and gives them new titles—‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’—terms that identify them with their roles in this new relationship of accountability. Prior to the wedding ceremony, the couple may have been loosely accountable to one another as fiancé and fiancée. However, on the basis of the ceremony, a more formal covenant relationship of accountability is established, characterized by a new familial bond.

In this chapter, I shall present a case for baptism as a ceremony that formally initiates a person into a new relationship of accountability within the church community. Upon being baptized into Christ, a person takes on the title ‘in Christ’, a title that marks them out as a member of the church, the body of Christ. Prior to baptism, a person may well have had some relationship of accountability to the church community. However, on the basis of the baptismal vows, a more formal covenant relationship of accountability is established; the baptizand is identified as ‘in Christ’ and welcomed into the accountability structures of the church family. To highlight the implications of this, let us make two introductory points about what this means.

First, upon being baptized in the name of Christ, a person is initiated into the church as the place of accountability that is fertile for being hearing and being conformed to God’s story. As the body of Christ, the church exists as an environment of storytelling wherein the lives of baptizands grow into the Christological identification they are given in baptism. How does this happen? Within the church, a baptizand is surrounded by a community dedicated to bearing witness

to the Christological story of creation. On the one hand, the baptizand is told they have been created to be a child of God in Christ. On the other hand, they are assured that, while sin leads them astray from God's purposes, God enters into our situation, in Christ, to redeem them so that, in and through Christ, their life can become all that God creates it to be. As the church witnesses to God's story of who a baptizand is in Christ, the primary emphasis is not (or, at least, should not be) on individuals themselves growing to become someone they *are not yet* but on their conforming to who they *are* in Christ. They discover this not only through the witness of the church community, but also through the power of the Spirit who is actively involved in the life of the church giving it its form as the body of Christ. As we shall consider in this chapter, baptizands must learn they are not simply accountable to God in and of themselves but are accountable to God in Christ, through the Spirit.

Second, upon being baptized in the name of Christ, the baptizand should ideally be born into a life of discipleship that accompanies their participation in the church's story. This will involve them growing into someone new, albeit as a consequence of learning who they are and should be in the eyes of God; it involves them living into their new life in Christ and thereby becoming who God knows them to be according to God's story. This growth takes place in and through the life of the church. By initiating a person into the church family, baptism establishes a bond of fellowship between the baptizand and the body of Christ, according to which the church promises to encourage, nurture, and instruct them in their discipleship in Christ, albeit with the help of God. Again, therefore, baptism leads to a new relationship of accountability in Christ, wherein the baptizand stands in a relationship with their new brothers and sisters who have the authority to judge them as a member of the church 'in Christ' (that is, insofar as their judgement serves to upbuild them in the faith).

In sum, baptism involves initiation into a life in which the church should (1) promise to teach baptizands about what it means to be accountable to God in Christ, and then (2) hold them to an account of who they are in Christ. It is by being baptized into the accountability of the church community that the baptizand comes to live into their identity 'in Christ'.

The aim of this chapter will be to develop and elaborate on this account of what it means to be accountable to God in Christ according to one's baptism. I shall begin by offering some background to this view, with a retelling of what could be described as the origin story of Christian baptism: the baptism of Jesus. Building on this story, we then consider how Jesus became foundational to the church's thinking about baptism through the theology of the apostle Paul. In so doing, I shall raise the question of what it means to be accountable to God in Christ according to one's baptism. To address this question, I shall first distinguish our view of accountability in Christ from John the Baptist's view of accountability. I shall then elaborate on our view by considering what it means for God to create

humanity to find fulfilment in and through the person of Christ. Once we have become clearer about what it means to be accountable in Christ, we shall return to connect this view of accountability to the theology of baptism. This will lead us to consider the bearing baptism into the body of Christ has on how human fulfilment is understood. It is by participation in, and through finding belonging in, the life of the church that humans can begin to discover what it means to be accountable to God in Christ and, in so doing, cultivate the virtue of accountability. We conclude by drawing together some of the threads of this chapter and raise two implications that follow from our discussion.

1. The Baptism of Jesus and the New Story of Repentance

The Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus's baptism begins with John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness of Judea offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.¹ John is calling people to repent and be baptized in an event that will turn their lives around. For John, baptism mediates God's forgiveness to people, purifies them, and initiates them into a new way of life that bears good fruit, a life characterized by good actions.² As such, baptism prepares them for the coming of the Lord and, specifically, the Lord's judgement. To bring a sense of urgency to the narrative he is preaching, John makes it clear that the Lord's judgement is something to be feared. With loaded exhortations, he warns the crowds that if they do not turn their lives around, the Lord will cut them down as wood for the fire or as chaff that will burn with unquenchable fire.

What happens when Jesus arrives on the scene? What unfolds is something entirely unexpected according to John's narrative. When John encounters Jesus and recognizes him as Lord, John responds in the way we might expect, at least according to John's narrative understanding. He responds with reverence, as one who does not consider himself worthy enough even to untie the thong of Jesus's sandal. But contrary to John's every expectation, Jesus asks John to baptize him. John is so taken aback by this request that his immediate reaction is to resist. According to John's narrative of repentance, it is not Jesus who should be baptized by John; rather, it is John who should be baptized by Jesus. In his pushback, John tries to hold Jesus accountable. What do I mean by this? In his initial reaction to Jesus, John challenges who Jesus is according to John's account of who he thinks Jesus should be.³ In so doing, as ironic as it may be, John assumes a certain

¹ The account of Jesus's baptism here is based on Matthew 3.

² For a helpful and nuanced discussion of the purificatory aspects of John's baptism, see Craig A. Evans, 'The Baptism of John in a Typological Context', in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross (London: T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 45–71.

³ We see many of Jesus's followers challenging him over the course of his ministry, most prominently Peter when he denounces Jesus's foretelling of his suffering, death, and resurrection (Matt. 16:22).

authority over Jesus based on his understanding of who Jesus is as a character in John's story.

However, in response to John's immediate reaction, Jesus insists, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). For Jesus, his undergoing a baptism of repentance is integral to God's plan; it is part of the narrative of how God is making all things right. In response to Jesus's insistence, John consents to the new narrative Jesus is introducing to the world. Whereas John has been exhorting individuals to turn their lives around through their own repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sin, Jesus's actions align with a new narrative of repentance that is grounded in him. As becomes clearer elsewhere in the New Testament, righteousness is not fulfilled by individuals themselves repenting before God, but by Jesus identifying with the very depths of humanity, of its sinfulness, and delivering it into new life. By submitting to John's story of repentance and undergoing baptism, Jesus brings John's story to its fulfilment so that, in and through him, the story of creation would be turned around. Jesus's baptism, therefore, is one of the first instances of Jesus standing in for humanity, in our place and on our behalf, and turning humanity around in ways we cannot do for ourselves. It is through the vicarious humanity of Christ that God establishes forgiveness, that death makes way for life, that the old Adamic humanity is given new representation in the new Adam, Jesus Christ.⁴

How does the story of Jesus's baptism conclude? It ends with the Trinitarian stamp of approval on this introduction to the new narrative. As Matthew describes: 'When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"' (Matt. 3:16–17). Right here, in this conclusion, we are presented with a motif that is at the heart of the gospel narrative. The gospel does not focus primarily on the stories of individuals turning their lives around, making themselves righteous before God, but in the triune God stepping into the human narrative, transforming that narrative, so as to redeem creation and draw the narrative of creation to the conclusion for which God had created it. It is on this basis that individual human lives are transformed.

Accordingly, a new view of baptism would come to be developed, evident in the ministry of the apostle Paul, which focuses on the 'one baptism' that identifies persons with the 'one Lord' Jesus Christ, by the 'one Spirit', according to 'one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:4–6). In contrast to John the Baptist's narrative, Paul's theology of baptism is not primarily concerned with preparing individuals for Christ's impending judgement but with initiating them into a community that bears witness to and participates in the

⁴ On the vicarious baptism of Christ, see J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), pp. 63–70.

redemption accomplished in Christ. The contrast between John and Paul is especially evident at one point in Acts when Paul challenges some disciples who have only received John's baptism of repentance. He pronounces, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." And so, on hearing this, the disciples were baptized in the name of Jesus' (Acts 19:4–5). This new baptism 'in the name of Jesus' is not grounded in individual acts of repentance but in the revelation of who Jesus Christ is for us, as it is made known by the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. Two Views of Accountability to God

How does this Christocentric narrative of baptism relate to our theology of accountability? To address this question, it would be helpful to refresh by offering a precise definition of how we are thinking about accountability to God.

Accountability to God: the condition of someone standing before God, who has an authority to judge who that person is and should be in creation. It is according to God's creative purposes that human beings understand who they are and should be, and so it is according to God's own purposes that God judges persons.

In John the Baptist's initial narrative, humans are primarily accountable to God in and of themselves, based on the merits of their own life and action. Now it is true John's baptism of repentance gives persons a chance to receive God's forgiveness, to become purified and reborn into a new way of life. Nonetheless, a person's worth and value still seem to be measured and defined according to their own righteousness, and according to their own baptism, repentance, and purification. In contrast to this, on a Christocentric narrative, human accountability to God is found in Christ. This means that, ultimately, a person's worth and value are derived from Christ, in accordance with who he is and what he does on our behalf. The focus of Christian baptism, therefore, is on a person being 'baptized into Christ' or 'into the name of Christ' (Gal. 3:27). And, as Paul adds, it involves 'putting on' or 'being clothed in Christ' (Gal. 3:27), which is brought about by our being united to Christ by the Spirit.⁵ As Everett Fergusson explains, in Galatians 3:27, Paul is saying baptism in Christ 'determines one's identity'; being baptized into (the name of) Christ means one belongs to Christ.⁶

⁵ See Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 124–7.

⁶ Everett Fergusson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 149.

While on the surface these two narratives could appear competitive, this would be a misperception. It is rather the case that Jesus's narrative brings John's narrative to its fulfilment⁷—not simply in and through Jesus's baptism, but also in and through the ministry his baptism inaugurates, culminating in his death, resurrection, and ascension. In the story of Jesus's baptism, the Lord enters John's narrative of repentance, identifies with human sinfulness, and is cleansed in order to make all things new.⁸ It turns out that John's baptism does not simply prepare the way for the coming of the Lord's judgement; rather, it prepares the way for Christ entering into the fullness of the human situation and taking its fatal consequences to himself as the judge judged in our place, to use Barth's famous phrase.⁹ In our terminology, the divine accountant becomes human accountee, and by uniting accountant and accountee, Christ brings about the fullness of human accountability to God. Consequently, in Paul's baptismal narrative, the emphasis is placed on participation in Christ, in his death and resurrection, and on the human value and worth that derive from him. This point is brilliantly captured in Gregory of Nazianzus's words of proclamation: 'Christ is baptized, let us descend with him that we may also ascend with him.'¹⁰

This brief sketch of what it means to be accountable to God in Christ is not straightforward. The complexity of this view becomes all the more evident when we connect it to many other relevant passages in Paul's writings. Take, for example, the following mystifying assertions from Paul in Colossians 3:4–5:¹¹ (1) a person's new life in Christ 'is hidden with Christ in God'; (2) a person's new life 'is' Christ; and (3) the glory of a person's life will appear when Christ appears. Is there anything we can say about the meaning of such assertions—at least, prior to the eschaton? The first thing to say is that, given some of the rhetorical flourishes in Paul's writings, we should be careful about investing too much energy in making logical deductions from some of his grander statements. Yet we should also not be too quick to dismiss them. What we can say is that these

⁷ Accordingly, John Calvin writes, 'we see that the completion of baptism is in Christ, and for this reason we call him the proper object of baptism'. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.15.6.

⁸ As Sean McDonough writes, 'Whatever we make of the particulars of the story of Jesus's baptism by John, Jesus clearly embraces the vision of renewal offered by John and makes it his own. In all the Gospels, we are meant to see that Jesus is in agreement with John's basic proclamation, even if he may modify or advance it in certain ways.' Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 24.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), IV/1, pp. 211–83. Hereafter, '*Church Dogmatics*' is abbreviated as 'CD'. Drawing on the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, it might be more appropriate here to describe Jesus as the purifier purified in our place. As Gregory writes, 'Jesus submitted to be purified in the river Jordan for my purification, or rather, sanctifying the waters by his purification'. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Browne and James Swallow (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), 38.16; see also 29.20.

¹⁰ Gregory, *Orations*, 39.14.

¹¹ For an account of this book's approach in relation to Pauline authorship, see Chapter 4, n. 3.

three assertions suggest God identifies God's account of who humanity is and should be with who Jesus Christ is. This explanation, however, does not get us very far. So, in Section 3, I shall elaborate on what it means to be accountable to God in Christ and then connect this to Paul's baptismal theology, with a particular focus on his letter to the Colossians.

3. Accountability to God in Christ

As I have been arguing in this book, we are born into a world where we grow and develop according to accounts others have of us, accounts of who we are and who we should be. As such, we live in a world where relationships of accountability are foundational to our formation. Not only is this an observable feature of human life, but it is also a dynamic for which God creates us: God creates us to grow, flourish, and experience obligation in response to the judgement of others. However, while this dynamic is itself a very good thing, it also exposes us to the risk of being distorted by false narratives. As we considered in Chapter 6, this danger lies at the heart of the sinful narrative of the world. From the very origins of human storytelling, we have told ourselves false narratives that compete with God's true narrative. Often based on overinflated notions of human autonomy, we seek to usurp God's place as the ultimate authority over (or author of the meaning of) our lives. As we also saw in Chapter 6, the fallenness of humanity is bound up with the wayward human desire to embrace for ourselves the authority to judge what is right or wrong, good or evil, according to our own delusions of grandeur. Consequently, when God reveals God's true narrative to this fallen world, it subverts the sinful narratives that form us.

What is God's true narrative for creation, according to Paul? In line with the Trinitarian story we are adopting, Paul's narrative of creation is grounded in the triune God's electing purposes, which are actualized in creation and providence and find their true substance and true end in Christ. In the words of David Fergusson, 'the world was made so that Christ might be born'.¹² For Paul, it is in, through, and for Christ that 'all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers. . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:16–17). When it comes to humans specifically, God chooses us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And God predestines us for adoption through Christ (Eph. 1:4–5). This is the one true narrative as Paul understands it. So, for Paul, the coming of Christ is not simply a divine repair job but the very consummation of God's creation story. God

¹² David Fergusson, 'Creation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 77.

identifies creation with Christ in such a way that creation derives its fulfilment as the new creation from Christ. Accordingly, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, one of the key roles of the church is to tell baptizands the story of who they are in Christ. It is by learning who they are in Christ that they can then come to embody this identity.

Now, superficially, it would be easy to respond to Paul's Christocentric narrative with the concern it opens the door to a kind of Christomonism—a charge often levelled against Barth's appropriation of Pauline theology.¹³ That is, if Christ is the ultimate *telos* of the human story—the one in whom this story finds its fulfilment—then any role for the agency of other humans could appear to be irrelevant to God. The way to address this concern is to emphasize that, under the Christ narrative, all other human narratives are derivative rather than extraneous. And while derivative narratives may not be essential to the core narrative, this does not mean they cannot possess value in other ways; it simply means their value must be understood as deriving from the core narrative.

In what way is the creation story derivative? Creation derives both its being and meaning from God, according to the love the Father has for the Son 'before the foundation of the world' (John 17:24). The reason the story of creation is Christocentric is because the act of creation expresses the Son-centric love of God the Father. Once again, this is not to suggest that God's eternal identity is essentially narrational; it is simply to suggest that God's creative act tells a story that bears witness to the Father's love for the Son. The other point to make clear is that this does not imply creation only exists as a piece of divine self-expression, as a kind of divine vanity project. Creation also bears witness to the fact that God's love overflows to create something wholly new to be the object of God's love. The astounding fact that God should determine to direct God's love to creation means creation possesses a value that vastly exceeds any value we might think we can create for ourselves—or, indeed, that we think we might possess in being the kind of creatures who can create value for ourselves. But, as creatures, we cannot create or sustain our own value but can only ever discover our God-given value in Christ, in whom we are drawn to share in the Son's love for the Father, according to the Spirit. Jeremy Begbie captures this point beautifully:

the *telos* of the pressure of divine love for humans is our adoption into the life of God. We are 'placed' by the Spirit in the Son's relation to the Father, and in this way become children of God, co-heirs with Christ of all he receives. A little more fully: by the grace of the Spirit we share in the eternal Father's love for the Son

¹³ Barth refers to the 'unlovely term' of Christomonism as the view 'that Jesus Christ has merged into world-occurrence and world-occurrence into Him, so that we can no longer speak of them as separate things'. Barth, *CD* IV/3, p. 713.

and in the Son's eternally grounded loving response to the Father. In this way the Father's love for the Son comes to be 'in' those who love Jesus (Jn. 17:26).¹⁴

When we become clear about the order and purpose of creation in relation to the triune love of God, the nature of the church's role in holding baptizands accountable also becomes clearer. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the church is called first to tell baptizands about who they *are* in Christ, so they might seek to live as the children of God they are recognized to be in baptism. This is fundamental because, for a person to know who they should become, they must first know who they are. Once this is achieved, the church can then, second, judge baptizands in a way that helps them to live out and flourish in their new identities—to embody and express who they are (re)born to be in Christ. Again, the church undertakes this twofold role by the power of the Spirit, who works in and through the church to clothe persons in Christ.¹⁵ In so doing, the Spirit unites the church in a union of kinship, a kinship in which the body of Christ is united by sharing the same Spirit (rather than the same blood).¹⁶ This kinship does not prevent persons from expressing themselves in their own unique ways, but frees them to do so in a way expressive of the flourishing that comes from belonging to Christ.

How, more precisely, are we to understand the place of human beings within this Christocentric narrative? The notion that Christ brings about the fulfilment of God's overarching story for creation means no other human can add to this fulfilment. We can only participate in it. What this indicates is that any authority we have is never over God or in parallel with God, but only under God. At most, we can only ever be sub-authors in God's story of creation. Any pretension we have some ultimate storytelling ability over or alongside God is to treat ourselves as divine, which is idolatrous. The apostle Paul argues against such pretence when he insists we must not be taken 'captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ' (Col. 2:8). Since Christ 'is the head of all rule and authority' (Col. 2:10), all other rulers and authorities have been disarmed (Col. 2:15).

What practical guidance does Paul give for how we can actively participate in God's narrative and thereby embody who we are in Christ? Paul calls the Colossians, on the basis of their baptism, to 'seek the things that are above, where Christ is' (Col. 3:1), and to 'let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts' (Col. 3:15). On the one hand, this means they must 'put to death . . . what

¹⁴ Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More: The Theological Promise of the Arts in a Reductionist World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), p. 123.

¹⁵ As Matthew Thiessen writes: 'To receive the *pneuma* is to be en clothed in Christ because the *pneuma* is the *pneuma* of God's son, who is Christ.' Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 111.

¹⁶ See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 113; Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 76–7.

is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry' (Col. 3:5). On the other hand, he calls them to 'put on . . . compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. . . . And above all these things put on love' (Col. 3:12, 14). These verses offer just a small sample of the practical guidance Paul provides as to what it looks like to be clothed in Christ. Paul is clear, therefore, that the title 'in Christ' does not simply identify members of a social group, nor merely point to a mystical feature of church life; being 'in Christ' has clear practical implications for how we are to live and be judged in the present. As such, Paul holds the Colossians to an account of who they should be as active members of the church, members who, in and through baptism, 'have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (Col. 3:9–10).

Paul also adds that a major part of what it means to flourish as the one body of Christ, in which 'the Word of Christ dwells in [them] richly', is to hold one another accountable as a community of accountability, 'teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom' (Col. 3:15). He calls the Colossians to establish and upbuild one another according to who they are in Christ so they might come to know and act out their roles as characters in the Christ narrative. Upon making these practical points, Paul reiterates that whatever the Colossians do as the church, they must do 'in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:17). In so doing, Paul emphasizes the role of the expression 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' or 'in Christ'. These serve to identify them with, and bear witness to, the relationship of accountability that defines both who they are and whose they are.

4. Accountability and Baptism in Christ

Let us now try to think more specifically about the difference baptism makes to Paul's theology of accountability.¹⁷ When Paul addresses the Colossians, he distinguishes them as those who have 'been buried with [Christ] in baptism', and who, in baptism, have been 'raised with Christ through faith in the powerful working of God' (Col. 2:12). This raises some questions. If the Christocentric story of creation applies to all things, then why does Paul here (and elsewhere) direct his guidance primarily to baptizands? What difference does baptism (with water rather than Spirit) make to how persons are accountable to God in Christ? The very basic answer to these questions is that baptizands are those who have been

¹⁷ For further discussion of Paul's theology of accountability, see Leander Keck's excellent chapter 'The Accountable Self', in *Christ's First Theologian: The Shape of Paul's Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), pp. 133–45.

marked out as ‘in Christ’ and formally initiated into the accountability structures of the church.¹⁸ This means Paul can see them as persons who will be receptive to his authority. However, there is more we can say here. Within the church, baptizands are distinguished by the fact they are actively participating in and being formed by the story of who they are in Christ. By the power of the Spirit, they are being mobilized to play a special role in the Christ narrative—that is, a role the rest of the world is not playing. It therefore makes practical sense for Paul to address baptizands distinctively as characters who either do or will perceive themselves as participants in the Christ narrative.

What about those not baptized with water? As persons not identified as being ‘in Christ’ and yet to be initiated into the church’s story, it does not make practical sense to address them in the same way. Paul is committed to drawing a sharp contrast between the worldly narrative and the Christ narrative. And if Paul were to refer to those outside the church (i.e. the unbaptized) as participants in Christ’s narrative, he would risk confusing these two narratives. That said, while there may be practical reasons for Paul to resist such confusion, he does recognize there are ways in which these two narratives are entangled with one another. This is evident in the ways in which Paul presents all *things* as participating in Christ’s narrative (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Cor. 5:16–19; Eph. 1:9–10; Col. 1:16–20) and all *persons* as participating in the worldly narrative (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1–4; Gal. 3:1–3; Col. 2:20). It is also especially evident in Paul’s account of how he is torn between these narratives in Romans 7:14–25. Nonetheless, those in Christ are receptive to the power and authority Christ has over the world, draw and, indeed, drag them into Christ’s narrative. For Paul, the unbaptized must be invited to participate in the life of the church so they can be baptized into its accountability structures and thereby drawn into the Christ narrative. It is within these structures they find an environment conducive for them to grow to become who they are in Christ and discover what it means to participate in Christ’s narrative.

What makes a person ready for baptism? A person is ready when they have been prepared to be identified with Christ. This may mean preparing themselves to take this step. Or, in the case of those with cognitive limitations, it may mean that others (e.g. their parents or guardian) prepare to make vows to ensure the baptizand participates in the accountability structures of the church. In sum, water baptism makes a difference by marking persons as ‘in Christ’ in a way that identifies them as accountees of the church.

We must be clear, however, that the title ‘in Christ’ is not merely a social or cultural marker but primarily a theological marker. As George Hunsinger notes, water baptism is ‘a form of God’s Word [that] imparts what it proclaims in, with,

¹⁸ As N. T. Wright notes: ‘Baptism is a *community-marking symbol*.’ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 421–2 (emphasis original).

and through its visible form'.¹⁹ When God's Word is embraced and proclaimed in the ceremony of baptism in a way that leads a person to be identified as 'in Christ', the Spirit is also present, uniting the baptizand to the body of Christ, thereby undergirding the proclamation that initiates them into the life of the church. Therefore, as Hunsinger adds, following Peter Vermigli, 'water baptism is . . . an instrument of the Spirit'.²⁰ In this respect, baptism should function as an outward sign that witnesses to God's being at work in the person's ecclesial life, helping them to live into their identity in Christ.

There is a further point, especially relevant for understanding a Pauline theology of accountability, that should be highlighted here. For Paul, baptism invites a person to learn about, embody, and enact God's account of who they are, freed from the sin that enslaves them. Again, therefore, as we discussed in Chapter 7, it is profoundly mistaken to view life in Christ as being primarily motivated by the thought of earning some extrinsic reward or avoiding some extrinsic punishment—that is, a reward or punishment that is extrinsic to who they are. Rather, baptism delivers a person into a life in which they praise God for the intrinsic rewards (e.g. new life, purity, peace, and abounding joy) that are a part of discovering and becoming who they are in Christ, and which happens by being bound to God's account of who God creates them to be. When a person is built up in Christ to experience salvation, they find life in Christ to be its own reward, and, consequently, they embrace their new identity in thanksgiving to God. This emphasis on the intrinsic rather than the extrinsic motivations of life in Christ is essential to a Pauline theology of accountability.²¹ This is evident in the following passage from Colossians:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col. 2:6–7)

In line with these verses in Colossians, Paul also has the following to say in his epistle to the Romans, in response to the charge of antinomianism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him in baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

¹⁹ George Hunsinger, 'Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 3 (2000): pp. 247–69; quotation from p. 257.

²⁰ Hunsinger, 'Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness', p. 258.

²¹ For further discussion of intrinsic versus extrinsic ethics in Paul, see Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, pp. 363–5.

In these passages, Paul does not encourage followers of Christ to perform good works by bribing them with extrinsic rewards or threatening them with extrinsic punishment. Rather, he seeks to motivate them by reminding them of who they are in Christ, according to their baptism. The thrust of Paul's question in the Romans passage is essentially 'Do you not know you can live out who you are?' For Paul, the value of following Christ is discovered by knowing who we are in Christ. It is by first learning this truth that we come to rejoice in who we are in Christ and, with joy, are motivated to become who Christ calls us to be, in gratitude to God. This joy, as we shall now consider, is characteristic of a person who is forming the virtue of accountability.

5. Experiencing Accountability in Christ

As Simeon Zahl points out, a shortcoming of some theological work on participation in Christ is that this theme can find itself presented in purely ontological terms that evade phenomenological description—that evade any reflection on how a specific relationship with Christ might connect with experience.²² One of the reasons why theologians sometimes fall short here is their concern to avoid reducing God to an object of human experience, or, at least, treating God as subject to human experience. A related (potential) shortcoming with the argument of this book is that, by trying to avoid reducing God to a character in a human story—by emphasizing that God's story transcends our stories—we could end up neglecting the ways in which God's story can relate to and affect the finite stories that undergird and shape our daily lives. We briefly addressed this danger in Chapter 7 by noting that prioritizing God's story need not render our stories meaningless. Rather, it should simply help us to see there is a larger narrative context—God's story—according to which we should seek to understand our stories, a context that does not evacuate all meaning from our stories but adds to them and puts them in their proper context. By recognizing this point, we are able to appreciate there is always more going on than we can immediately narrate, grasp, or experience. This is not only important for our place in the ontology of God's story, but also for reflecting on how we experience life as characters in God's story.

What are some of the implications of our narrative realism for thinking about what it means to participate in and experience God's story? First, when we experience uncertainty, doubt, anxiety, guilt, shame, and so on, belief in the reality of the gospel can assure us that God is for us (ontologically) even when our thoughts and feelings draw attention to the ways in which we are not for God,

²² Simeon Zahl is especially critical of T. F. Torrance and Kathryn Tanner on this point in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 95–108.

even when our faith is not delighting in positive feelings of love, joy, peace, gratitude, and hope. In this respect, God's story provides us with a firm framework for interpreting our capricious thoughts and feelings in relation to God's faithfulness. Second, belief in the reality of God's story should remind us that a major part of discipleship is seeking those ecclesial environments, communities, and activities conducive to experiencing and being (trans)formed by God's story in a way that involves more than just intellectual or emotional assent to our own theological stories and propositions. These two implications are critical for understanding what it means to relate to God as an external accountant committed to our flourishing in ways we cannot be for ourselves, simply on the basis of our own internal resources.

To be clear, however, a recognition of God's role as external accountant does not imply we cannot form internal resources that will help us participate in a relationship of accountability to God. In particular, I have been arguing that accountability can be understood as a virtue that disposes us to embrace accountability to God. By means of this virtue, we can find assurance in the fact that God is for us in a way that leads us to welcome God's judgement over our lives. This virtue can also draw us deeper into the life of the church with a view to experiencing and becoming formed by God's judgement. Yet we also need to be clear that the virtue of accountability is not a disposition we simply form internally, in and of ourselves, in a way that prepares us to live accountably to God. Our participation in a relationship of accountability does not simply consist in our expressing the virtue of accountability in relation to God. Rather, like the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the virtue of accountability is learnt by participating in the life of the church and thereby experiencing accountability to God.²³ So, yet again, priority must be given to the Trinitarian and ecclesial environment wherein we experience accountability to God and thereby learn to live accountably to God. To use Pauline language, we might say the virtue of accountability is a fruit of the Spirit we come to bear by participating in an environment of accountability to God that is fertile for such growth.

How might we construe this experience of accountability? We should first note that we cannot provide a universally applicable account of what it will be like for each person to experience accountability to God. This experience will be particular to each person relative to the unique role they are called to play within the life of the church—a unique role that will be influenced by numerous social, environmental, psychological, physical, cultural, and other factors. For our present

²³ In making this point, we need not rule out this possibility of persons outside the church, who are not baptized in Christ, experiencing accountability to God. Generally, however, if this happens, it will be the result of someone encountering the life of the church—for example, encountering one of its members witnessing to the life of the church. If such an encounter leads a person to embrace accountability to God, it would make sense to say there is an extent to which they are being caught up into the life of the church.

purposes, therefore, we will be deliberately vague about how we think about this experience. This will ensure we leave plenty of room for a wide variety of experiences of accountability.

So, broadly speaking, how might we think about this experience? In Trinitarian terms, we can say we experience accountability to God by the Spirit judging and preparing our hearts, transforming our desires so our lives might embody an account of Christ—or, to paraphrase Paul, so we might become ‘a letter of Christ’ sent by God (the Father) ‘to be known and read by all’ (2 Cor. 3:2–3). When this happens, our lives conform to the image of Christ so that, by the power of the Spirit, we can begin to reflect the glory of the Lord into the world (2 Cor. 3:18). What we again see here is that, for Paul, our fulfilment is not found through our participating in a story that finds its end in *our* glory and perfection, but by participating in a story that has its end in *Christ’s* glory and perfection. The church’s end is to exist and serve as the body of Christ. Indeed, when Paul is describing how ‘each of us will be accountable to God’ (Rom. 14:12), he writes:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Rom. 12:7–9)

So, for Paul, fulfilment is found under the lordship of Christ, by belonging to Christ. This is experienced in the most intimate of relationships (union) with Christ, by the power of the Spirit, according to the will of the Father. Once again, the place of accountability where this fellowship is experienced is the church. Within the church, baptizands hold one another accountable as brothers and sisters in Christ—in whom they have been baptized—and, by the grace of God, upbuild one another in cultivating the virtues of the children of God. In this respect, the church community provides the environment wherein persons can be elevated into conformity with Christ. It is by experiencing the life of Christ within the church, by the power of the Spirit, that individuals are transformed into representatives of Christ.

One of the biblical metaphors that can help us to imagine this experience of accountability to God is the metaphor of light. Within the life of the church, the Spirit is at work shining the light of Christ through the baptismal community onto others in a way that enlightens them to see who they are and who they should be before God. For Paul, this light shines into the darkness of our lives, exposing who we are, so we might grow to become children of light, bearing the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth.²⁴ Similarly, for John, this shining of light constitutes a form of judgement, but not one that simply serves to condemn;

²⁴ Eph. 5:8–13. More concrete guidance on some of what this involves is given in the rest of the chapter.

rather, it is one that saves (John 3:17–20). By coming into the light, we can experience the truth of God so we can see plainly both who we are and who we must become in the sight of God (John 3:21).

A final point to add here is that the experience of belonging to God in Christ is critical to the formation of the virtue of accountability. This is something we discover through finding belonging within the life of the church.²⁵ It is with this sense of belonging to God, and belonging to the shared project of being a creature before God, that we grow to embrace our accountability to God. To relate this point to the focus of this chapter, one of the key functions of the baptismal ceremony is to create the sense of belonging. Practically speaking, there are three ways in particular in which this takes place: (1) through the vows that commit the church and the baptizand to one another; (2) through the water that signifies a cleansing of the past and rebirth into a new family; and (3) through the baptizand taking on the title ‘in Christ’, like a surname that signifies their participation in the church family. Not only do these things signify to the baptizand they belong in the church, but they also signify to the church that the baptizand belongs to them as a baptismal community which is called to nurture the baptizand as one of the family, as a child of God in Christ. By establishing the belonging of its members, baptism serves to make the church a fertile space for cultivating the virtue of accountability in a way that further helps persons to embody who they are ‘in Christ’. In both the history of Israel and the history of the church, God builds persons up by creating covenant communities in and through which they come to discover and thereby embrace a sense of belonging and thus a sense of their accountability as children of God.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, let us draw together some of the threads of this chapter and summarize two interconnected implications that follow from understanding

²⁵ The close connection between belonging to Christ and participating in Christ is emphasized by E. P. Sanders, who goes so far as to say that ‘Paul did not consider *belonging* to Christ to be different from being *in* him’. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), p. 462 (emphasis original). Drawing on Sanders, Richard Hays stresses that ‘real participation in Christ in Paul’s letters should find anchor points not only in Paul’s portrayal of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31; see Rom 12:4–8) but also in texts such as Rom 6:3–11, where Paul speaks of being “baptized into Christ Jesus,” and Gal 3:27–29, where he links baptism with being clothed in Christ, belonging to Christ, and living in a community that anticipates the eschatological transcendence of the fleshly distinctions that divide us’. Richard Hays, ‘What Is “Real Participation in Christ”? A Dialogue with E. P. Sanders on Pauline Soteriology’, in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 345. For a helpful reflection on these quotes from Sanders and Hays, see Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Rethinking Paul: Protestant Theology and Pauline Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 190–4.

baptism as an initiation into the ecclesial community of accountability in Christ, by the Spirit, according to the will of the Father.

First, *baptism initiates a person into a community that does not primarily judge them according to an account of who they should be but according to an account of who they are in Christ*. This is what it means to hold persons accountable in Christ. It thus becomes the shared task of the members of the church to teach one another who they are in Christ and what it means to belong to him and his body so that, together, their lives might grow into this reality and find the joy and fulfilment that stems from this. Such accountability does not simply involve obligating or pressuring one another to act in obedience to Christ. Much more importantly, it involves creating a place of belonging wherein persons can be formed and transformed as followers of Christ, characterized by the virtue of accountability. As a result, persons will become inspired to follow Christ as an intrinsic good rather than as a means to some extrinsic end. In this way, Christ rules in a person's heart (Col. 3:15).

Second, *baptism affirms that a person belongs to God unconditionally, that is, by right of creation and redemption—and the affirmation of their belonging is irrespective of any judgements about their value and worth to society*. This belonging gives persons the security and assurance to become followers of Christ unburdened or unparalysed by the shortcomings of their actions—so much so that, when the church is truly acting as the body of Christ, the church becomes a community of accountability in which persons desire to confess their sins, on the understanding that the church's judgement will support them in their journeys of restoration. While there are many ways in which a person's behaviour can be self-destructive, ultimately no one has the power to destroy the fact that, in Christ, they are claimed as a child of God and so must be known and judged as such. In the words of the author of 2 Timothy 2:13, 'if we are faithless, [Christ] remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself'.

With these two implications, a baptismal theology of accountability stands against prevailing notions of accountability according to which (1) persons are judged (especially retributively) in a way that reduces accounts of them to an account of their actions, and (2) human belonging is seen to be conditional upon an account of their actions: *if you behave in these ways, if you achieve these things, then you will be judged worthy to belong to our group*. By resisting these two points, baptism in Christ constitutes a radically subversive act that challenges many of our societal systems of accountability—to the extent that those societal systems elevate the value and worth of the 'more functional' (or 'properly functional') members of society and denigrate the value and worth of those deemed 'functionally insufficient' or 'dysfunctional'. Baptism does not simply challenge these systems by introducing a counter-narrative, but by introducing persons to the one true narrative for which God creates the world, and therefore to the one true account of who each person is created to be in Christ.

The Story That Turned Paul's Life Around

Over the course of this book, a case has been made for a narrative view of accountability according to which we are to interpret ourselves as characters in the stories of others and, in particular, in God's Christological story of creation. This led to the suggestion that, to embody the true account of who God creates us to be, the Holy Spirit must empower us to identify with Christ. It is in and through Jesus Christ that our lives can reflect or, better, image the Father's will for us. Sharing in the triune life of God, in Christ by the Spirit, we come face to face with the Father and begin the process of knowing ourselves as we are known by God (1 Cor. 13:12). Here we discover that our experience of perfection does not simply concern the elevation of our inner lives but involves us finding the home where we belong in the presence of the triune God of grace.

In this chapter, we shall explore further what it means to be accountable to God in Christ by considering the life of the apostle Paul and his vision of accountability to God.¹ To focus our discussion, we shall look specifically at the turn Paul's life undertook upon encountering Christ on the road to Damascus. For many, this experience is perceived as the defining event in Paul's life: an event of conversion through which Paul became truly oriented towards God. Moreover, the kind of existential turn Paul underwent is sometimes viewed as a pivotal event in the order of salvation and, more specifically, in the story of an individual's salvation.² One consequence of this reading of Paul is that Paul's turn has become paradigmatic for how some Christians come to view their own story of salvation in relationship to God. While most Christians do not undergo the kind of experience Paul underwent on his way to Damascus, many will narrate stories of their conversion and salvation in a way that revolves around their own existential development—for example, their own life-changing experiences, their moral transformation,

¹ We do not have space in this chapter to offer a detailed account of Paul's narrative theology. For more in-depth accounts of Paul's story that find resonance with this chapter, see Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Rethinking Paul: Protestant Theology and Pauline Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 319–51; and Douglas A. Campbell, *Paul: An Apostle's Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

² A prime example of someone who made conversion central to the story of individual salvation is William Perkins. As Bruce Hindmarsh notes, the work Perkins did to tie the Reformed scheme of salvation to the individual experience of conversion 'would shape conversion narrative for generations to come'. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 36.

their theological development, and, perhaps, their profound sense of God's presence. Some Christians will even go so far as to talk about their own 'road to Damascus moment' to draw attention to a turning point in their own lives.

In what follows, I shall not question the decisiveness of the road to Damascus experience in Paul's life, nor will I query its salvific nature as an experience that was sanctifying for Paul. I shall, however, question how central this experience should be in our framing of the story of Paul's life before God. I contend that Paul's story is fundamentally about much more than his own existential journey or conversion, his own moral and religious development; it is about the triune God who transforms him. Furthermore, I argue that Paul's story is not truly meaningful in and of itself but finds its meaning within the context of God's Christological story.³ What makes his transformative experience meaningful is that it is a sign of the Spirit awakening him to become 'alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). Accordingly, if we are to make sense of Paul's Christian experience or, indeed, any Christian experience, we must index it to God's Christological story of creation in the way that Paul himself does throughout his writings.⁴ What makes Paul's transformative experience salvific is not simply that it draws him closer to perfection—for example, that, inwardly, he becomes morally and/or religiously upright—but that he is given a positive role to play in the story of creation (and of salvation) that has its beginning and its end in Jesus Christ.

In line with this reading of Paul's story, I shall seek to show that the story of our accountability to God does not revolve around us, whether around the condemnation of our sin, or, indeed, around our existential growth and flourishing. Rather, it is first and foremost about the triune God who holds us accountable: the divine author who purposefully begins, sustains, and concludes the story of creation. Yet, while God stands at the centre of this story, that same God gives humanity a central place in this story in and through Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, the divine accountant becomes the human accountee so that, by identifying with Christ through the Spirit, we can share in, experience, and become oriented towards our end in God. It is by participating in the triune life of God that our lives become defined by God. And since God is the end who defines all other ends, there can be no more perfect relationship of accountability than this.

1. Questioning the Story of Paul's Conversion

As the Sunday School version of the story of Paul's conversion usually runs, Saul the Jew was walking along the road to Damascus one day when he was hit by a

³ See, for example, Phil. 3:7–11.

⁴ For some examples of Paul indexing our stories to Christ's story, see Rom. 6:1–11; 1 Cor. 15:3–58; 2 Cor. 5:16–21; Gal. 2:15–21; Col. 1–3; Eph. 1:3–14.

blinding vision of Jesus that turned his life around. Consequently, Saul the Jew became Paul the Christian. While very few Christians see themselves as having become Christian by encountering a luminescent Jesus, the story of Paul's transformative experience has shaped the narrative many Christians adopt to describe their own conversions. Such language encourages Christians to describe conversion in much more dramatic terms than a merely phenomenological rendering of their conversions might invite. That is, it motivates them to interpret an experience that may not have seemed all that transformative to be, in actual fact, a profoundly transformative experience. This is particularly evident when Christians learn to re-narrate (or even re-remember) their experience of conversion in a way that conforms to the language of the New Testament. For example, Christians will sometimes appropriate Pauline metaphors and apply them to this experience, perceiving conversion as a transition from darkness to light, death to life, flesh to spirit, old to new, slavery to freedom, and rebirth. In sum, there is a tendency for Christians to base their interpretation of Christian conversion on the dramatic transformative experience of the apostle Paul. Evan Fales writes:

As one of the first, and perhaps the single most prominent convert to Christianity, Paul stands, for Christians, as a model both of conversion and of spiritual intimacy with the risen Lord. Paul is a paradigm.⁵

There are, however, a few complications with some of the underlying assumptions that often inform the account of Paul as a convert. Indeed, as we shall see, some recent biblical scholarship even goes so far as to question whether we should refer to Paul's road to Damascus experience (RDE) as an event of conversion. Why is this? On the one hand, it is true that Paul's RDE made a decisive difference to many aspects of his life. As we discuss later in this chapter, there is a transformation in (1) the way Paul worships God; (2) his understanding of who Jesus Christ is—he now views him as someone worthy of worship; and (3) his perception of who 'belongs' to the people of God—under the lordship of Jesus Christ, Paul recognizes that all persons can now belong to God. On the other hand, however, there remains an essential continuity to Paul's life through his RDE. Following Paul's RDE, he remains a Jew, and his transformative experience aligns *with* his Jewish life of worshipping the one God of Abraham. Therefore, Paul continues to see himself as a Jew and sees himself as worshipping the one God he always worshipped. So, there are reasons to think that referring to Paul as a convert, without qualification, could invite confusion over what happened to him on the road to Damascus. It can lead people to overlook the fact that Paul maintained many aspects of his particular religious identity. Rather than transitioning into an

⁵ Evan Fales, 'The Road to Damascus', *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (2005): pp. 442–59; quotation from p. 443.

entirely new religious existence, there is what we might refer to as the 'sublimation' of Paul's original religious existence—that is, the elevation of Paul's religiousness into a higher state.⁶

What does it mean to say that Paul's turn involves the sublimation of his Jewishness? It means Paul is elevated, with his Jewishness, into a relationship with Christ that enables him to correspond more truly to God's story of creation and, indeed, to the story of Israel. The sublimation of Paul's religiousness, therefore, does not primarily involve an existential or doxastic ascent into a higher form of religiousness (e.g. a graduation from Judaism to Christianity). Any change in Paul's Jewish life and theology is, at best, a secondary expression of his being elevated into a relationship with Christ, wherein he is guided by the transformative judgement of the Spirit. In narrative terms, it involves Paul ceasing to define himself according to his own religious narrative and coming to learn about who he is according to the reality of God's revelation and adjusting his religious commitments accordingly. As Karl Barth argues, 'Religion is never and nowhere true as such in itself'.⁷ That is, human religion only becomes true when God's revelation empowers human religiousness 'from without' to track with God's judgement—to awaken human religion to embody God's account of what it should be.⁸ In Christological terms, true religion is animated by the Spirit awakening persons and communities to conform and witness to Christ, to identify with Christ so they might reflect Christ into the world.

To be clear, however, by taking pains to prioritize the *objective* revelation and judgement of God, Paul in no way neglects the subjective role human accountees (other than Christ) have to play in a relationship of accountability. Paul is constantly offering specific guidance on what it means to live in conformity to God's judgement, so it would be a mistake to overlook this side of the relationship altogether. While we shall not go into the specifics of Paul's guidance, it will be helpful to speak of how he understands the subjective lives of individuals in their accountability to God. To do so, we shall remain focused on the topic of conversion and develop an account of what we shall refer to as *theological conversion*: the conversion whereby a person's life is brought into conformity with God's account of who that person should be. Once we have done this, we shall return to the question of Paul's conversion, or sublimation, and consider how we might apply our account of theological conversion to Paul's turn.

⁶ The use of the word 'sublimation' here is taken from Garrett Green's outstanding translation of §17 from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* I/2. Clarifying his use of this word, Green writes, 'To sublimate something—i.e., to make it sublime—suggests that it will become higher and better as a result'. Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. ix.

⁷ Barth, *On Religion*, p. 85.

⁸ Barth, *On Religion*, p. 85.

2. Reconciliation and Conversion

God creates a world in which humans come to express themselves in a variety of ways: as persons with particular beliefs, genders, races, ages, abilities, cultures, and so on. Beyond our differences, however, each of us is united by the fact that, in our particularity, we are created for right relationship with God. We are also united in our fallen rebellion against God's creative purposes. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit works in and through our subjective lives to communicate God's judgement to us and thereby draw us into conformity to God's account of who we are created to be in Christ. By so doing, the Spirit transforms our lives and unites us to Godself in a way that manifests God's purposes of reconciliation. While this book has devoted a great deal of attention to the Christological story of *creation*, it has yet to give much thought to the Christological story of *reconciliation*. Broadly put, this latter story is a chapter in God's overarching story of creation wherein God reconciles us from our own sinful fictions and returns us to God's story of creation. In order to understand the theological view of conversion I am proposing, it would be helpful to offer a slightly more detailed working account of the story of reconciliation.

There are many different starting points I could propose for God's story of reconciliation, but we shall begin with God the Father sending the Son into the world to identify with and live in subjection to our sinful narratives—to become like us in every way, yet without sin.⁹ In so doing, what results is the very conclusion our sinful stories ultimately seek: the (human) death of God. When we seek to usurp God's role as the sole author of creation's ultimate narrative, we express a desire to do away with any perceived competition. So, when God's story is revealed to this sinful world with divine power, in and through Christ, it is met with the sharpest of reactions from its religious, political, cultural, and philosophical storytellers. God is sent to the cross; Immanuel is put to death. However, while this may be the end our fallen stories seek, it is not the end of God's story. Through resurrection, Jesus Christ reveals the end of God's story of creation is not death but life. Moreover, the risen and ascended Christ reveals that God destines humanity for life together with God, life mediated, received, and experienced in Jesus Christ, according to the Father, and by the power of the Spirit. Ultimately, therefore, the complete experience of conversion to God must be understood as coming about through the ongoing mediation of the ascended Christ by the power of the Spirit. A theological account of conversion must be interpreted within the context of this wider Christological story of reconciliation. Before seeking to broach this, it will be helpful to introduce some further terminology and consider the distinction between the 'absolute telos' and 'relative telé'.

⁹ See Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15.

2.1 The absolute telos and relative télé

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus distinguishes between two kinds of telos: the relative and the absolute. Subjectively speaking, a relative telos refers to all finite télé that a person can be oriented towards within the boundaries of this world. This includes all télé that are not absolute but are willed to a lesser extent than or, indeed, for the sake of the absolute telos. By contrast, the absolute telos refers to a single telos that can only ever be willed for its own sake: there is no higher telos for the sake of which the absolute telos can be willed.¹⁰ As Kierkegaard argues, this telos transcends the limits of finitude and can only be willed absolutely; it has no finite end and must, moreover, 'be capable of being willed at every moment'.¹¹

A commitment to an absolute telos involves a theological commitment because it involves a relationship with God, who is the only one who absolutely transcends the relativities of the contingent order. Subjectively speaking, therefore, the perfect orientation of the religious believer is to become absolutely devoted to God or, as we discussed in Chapter 7, absolutely fearful of God such that they would be willing to sacrifice anything and everything out of their commitment to God. This means that if one of their relative télé—such as esteem, wealth, or even family—should come into conflict with their relationship with God, then they must be willing to surrender this telos. Otherwise, they would demonstrate a stronger attachment to a relative telos and thereby show they are only relatively committed to the absolute telos. This would mean right relationship with God would, in actuality, constitute a relative telos for them. This is because, *subjectively*, the relative/absolute status of a telos is determined by how a subject relates to it: if it is related to relatively, it is a relative telos; if it is related to absolutely, it is an absolute telos.¹²

There is, however, an important qualification to make here. Our télé are not simply determined by our own subjective perspective; they can also be determined by others—according to the accounts others have of who we are and should be. Indeed, as we have seen, there are times when we are not able to pursue the ends that are right for us. We need to be oriented towards such ends, therefore, by accountors who have greater insight than we do into certain aspects of who we are and who we should be according to some shared project. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to thinking about our relationship of accountability to God. In this fallen world, we are blind to so much of God's story of creation and thus to who we are supposed to be as characters in that story.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 394.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 394.

¹² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 408.

So, how might we think *objectively* about our relationship to relative *telé* and an absolute *telos*? Much of what we have just said about *telé* still applies. The key difference, however, lies in the fact that, objectively, it is not our subjective orientation that determines the nature of a *telos* but rather the *objective accountant* who determines what *telé* we should (and should not) be oriented towards both relatively and absolutely. Theologically, the absolute *telos*, which is right relationship with God, is determined by God. We are created to be defined by this *telos* above all else. Consequently, all relative *telé* must be pursued in harmony with right relationship with God.

2.2 A Christological account of theological conversion

How does this account of human *telé* apply to theological conversion? Put simply, theological conversion involves a turning process whereby a person's subjective life begins to conform to God's objective account of who they should be. There is, however, a difficulty here. In our finitude, we do not possess the ability to orient ourselves absolutely to God and thereby reflect all that God creates us to be. Consequently, we depend here on Jesus Christ, the one mediator in whom humanity is absolutely oriented towards God. To draw on John Calvin's words, we 'need a head, through whose bond [we] might cleave firmly and undividedly to [our] God. . . . The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him.'¹³ Theological conversion, therefore, does not simply involve our subjective lives becoming absolutely oriented towards God on the basis of our own strength and by our own abilities. Ultimately, it involves the Spirit empowering us to recognize, participate in, and thereby *identify* with Christ's absolute orientation towards God. As such, theological conversion does not merely transform us such that we reflect a perfect account of ourselves into the world. Rather, it transforms us so we reflect Christ into the world. Rowan Williams captures the implications of this point excellently:

In our identification with Christ . . . we are enabled to and called to be accountable for ourselves in a new way—not as individual selves, not even simply as agents living under the mandates, but as agents who have grasped or, better, been introduced into the full extent of their solidarity by accepting solidarity in and with Christ. In the light of that, I can say that I am now empowered to 'answer for' Jesus: I represent him before the world, I 'stand in' for him as he stands in for

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.12.1 (from his section, 'Christ Had to Become Man in Order to Fulfil the Office of the Mediator').

all; and by the same token, I 'stand in' for all my human neighbours before Christ. The only way I can be answerable for myself is by taking on this double accountability, for Christ and for others in the presence of Christ.¹⁴

In short, therefore, our accountability to God, and the conversion this entails, involves God encountering us in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so we might be drawn into God's mission to the world and thereby reflect the image of Christ.

How exactly the Holy Spirit mobilizes persons to reflect Christ into the world is not something we are going to be able to pin down. Indeed, persons will often reflect Christ without even realizing it.¹⁵ As such, the question of whether a person has experienced or is experiencing theological conversion is not one we can clearly answer. To evaluate a person's conversion (or lack thereof) with any precision would require us to be able to assess the quality of a person's relationship with God in a way that is not possible from our finite and sinful perspective. Nonetheless, we can question whether our lives are beginning to bear the kind of fruit that quintessentially follows from conforming to the history of reconciliation that finds its fulfilment in Christ, and therefore to God's account of who we are. This fruit of salvation may include theological commitments such as confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, and/or it may be expressed in our participation within the life of the church, the environment in which we grow to conform to Christ. But it may also be expressed without explicit reference to Christ. It may involve the fruit of the Spirit, 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal. 5:22–3); it may show itself through good deeds; and/or it may be expressed within the covenant life of Israel as it prepared the way for Christ's coming and thus provided a context wherein God's Word was forming a people in anticipation of Christ's coming. What makes such fruit valuable, however, is not that it signifies individual conversion—that it shows a person is meeting the criteria for becoming a Christian—but that it ultimately bears witness to Christ (again, even if not always explicitly). Precise questions that focus on our own conversion will too often, therefore, be beside the point.

3. Interpreting Paul's Road to Damascus Experience as an Event of Conversion

Having proposed a view of theological conversion, let us now apply it to the question of whether it is helpful to view Paul's RDE as an event of conversion.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), pp. 206–7.

¹⁵ See, for example, Matt. 25:37–40.

While I have just suggested that we are unable to develop precise criteria for assessing individual conversion, this does not mean we cannot reflect on what features of Paul's turn might be construed as a sign he is embracing his accountability to God. Doing so will also help us to think about how we should interpret our subjective lives in relationship to God's story of creation. Before we do this, however, it will be helpful to give further context to our discussion by providing a clearer sketch of the turn Paul underwent as a consequence of his RDE. As I do so, I shall accentuate a few features we might associate with theological conversion.

3.1 Paul's life-turn

Prior to the turn Paul's life took on his journey to Damascus, Paul was a Pharisee: a Jew firmly committed to the story of Israel and to participating in that story by conforming to its law and traditions. Furthermore, Paul's particular commitment to Pharisaism led him to become a persecutor of the Jesus movement. Indeed, in Galatians 1:13, Paul recounts he sought to 'destroy' (*eporthoun*) this movement; the word *eporthoun*, as Larry Hurtado notes, 'connotes harsh, even violent actions'.¹⁶ Hurtado continues:

indicative of the nature of his religious zeal at that time, he [Paul] points to his former actions as 'a persecutor of the church' (Philippians 3:6). Paul's language, especially his reference to 'zeal,' suggests a possible connection to an ancient Jewish tradition that allowed for, and even called for, the justifiable violence by Jews against fellow Jews seen guilty of major and public violation of God's law.¹⁷

So, prior to encountering Jesus, Paul was not only outside the early Jesus movement (the church), but he was also actively persecuting it. While the church may have associated itself with the Jewish tradition, to Paul it would have been an apostate tradition—a tradition that had fallen away from Judaism and become blasphemous.

However, as the story goes, one day when Paul was approaching Damascus, he was hit by a heavenly light that flashed around him. 'He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul then asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do"' (Acts 9:3–6). Following this encounter, as Beverly Roberts Gaventa describes, Paul turns from being a persecutor to becoming a proclaimer—someone who no

¹⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), p. 16.

¹⁷ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, pp. 16–17.

longer persecuted followers of Christ but who proclaimed Christ crucified and the power of his resurrection.¹⁸ What does it take for a persecutor to become a proclaimer? Susan Eastman writes, the 'radical change in Paul's life . . . displays and vindicates the transformative power of the gospel as the turn of the ages'.¹⁹

When we consider some of Paul's views on what follows from knowing Christ, we are given further reason to think Paul believed his encounter with Christ turned his life around. By coming to know Christ, for Paul, we turn from darkness to light (2 Cor. 4:6) and from death to new life (Rom. 6:3–11; Gal. 2:19–21). Also, reflecting on his own journey, Paul viewed his old life as a Pharisee as one characterized by a confidence in the flesh, and one from which he needed to be delivered (Phil 3:2–11; 1 Tim 1:13–16). He saw his prior religious life as one that was lacking but which found fullness in Christ. For him, encountering Christ led him to see reality anew, to see it more truthfully and meaningfully. So, there is no question this turn was transformative for Paul. And, for him, this transformation is grounded in a relationship with the very one whom he had been persecuting. To the extent that Paul was a persecutor of Christ, Paul had been unconsciously holding God to account as a character in his own religious story of the world—functionally, he had been judging it was wrong for God to reveal Godself in Jesus Christ. By becoming a proclaimer of Christ, following his RDE, he was given to live his life as a testimony to the triune God, as a character in God's Christological story. In this respect, there is much about Paul's turn that would seem to be indicative of theological conversion.

3.2 Why might it be unhelpful to foreground Paul's status as a convert?

Yet, as I indicated earlier, there are reasons why it can be unhelpful to focus on Paul's status as a convert—at least, without the qualifications I am offering in this chapter. On the one hand, his RDE did make a decisive difference to his life in a way that reflects theological conversion—that bears fruit of salvation he was not previously bearing. On the other hand, the changes in Paul's theology align with many aspects of his Jewish life of worshipping the one God of Abraham, which, as Paul came to learn, is a part of the story of reconciliation that has its end in Christ. Paul's RDE, therefore, does not lead him away from the story of Israel towards the story of the church; the church does not supersede Israel as the people of God.²⁰

¹⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

¹⁹ Susan G. Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 34.

²⁰ As Stephen Chapman writes, 'Paul the "convert" remains a preeminent warrant and symbol for supersessionism within Christian theology'. Stephen B. Chapman, 'Saul/Paul: Onomastics, Typology,

Rather, it leads him to reinterpret the story of Israel as one that finds fulfilment in Jesus Christ. For this reason, as I noted earlier, it can be problematic to prioritize Paul's status as a religious convert—that is, from Judaism to Christianity—in a way that foregrounds the revision of Paul's theology and eclipses God's ongoing faithfulness to Israel. It is perhaps better to view Paul as someone who experienced the sublimation of his Jewish life into a relationship with Jesus Christ, in a way that more clearly recognizes both the continuities and discontinuities of Paul's religious life.

Our main concern here is that focusing primarily on Paul's RDE as an event of religious conversion can lead us to make the story of Paul's experience primarily about him and the discontinuities in *his* life and *his* beliefs. For Paul, however, his turn is primarily a witness to God's self-revelation in Christ, which reveals the fulfilment of God's covenant commitment to Israel. When we read through Paul's letters, we find he seldom refers to his RDE, and when he does so, he does not primarily draw attention to what happened to him but to what God is doing in and through his life; he does not prioritize his experience but the one whom he experienced. For Paul, his turn is a consequence of the continuing faithfulness of the God of Israel to him—'an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin' (Rom. 11:1)—despite the sinful and confused ways in which he sought to disrupt (i.e. bring discontinuity to) God's story by persecuting Christ. In sum, a potential danger with making Paul's story a paradigm for conversion is that it encourages us to think about the relationship between Israel and the church according to the discontinuities between the religious beliefs of its members. By so doing, we can neglect the fundamental continuity that characterizes the larger theological story, which Paul thinks undergirds his transformation; we neglect the divine faithfulness that unites the story of Israel and the church.

3.3 The influence of perspective on interpreting Paul's RDE

At this point, however, I should qualify that not everyone would arrive at the same interpretation of Paul's turn that I have put forward or, indeed, as Paul himself would have had. Having emphasized the importance of recognizing the continuity between Israel and the church, we should be open about the fact that our position is very much biased by our Christian perspective on the matter. What does this mean? To conclude that it may be unhelpful to foreground Paul's status as a theological convert is based on the Christological story of creation that we are

and Christian Scripture', in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kevin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 215.

adopting. Were we to assess Paul's transformative experience according to a different narrative, we could arrive at a very different conclusion.

For example, were we to answer the question of whether Paul was a convert from a Pharisaic Jewish perspective (Paul's prior perspective), we would be more likely to highlight Paul's status as a convert (or, put negatively, an apostate). Why? It is because, according to the Pharisaic Jewish story Paul embraced previously, Paul's turn towards Christ led him to turn away from the story of Israel. He became oriented to God as one (1) who is God of both Jews and Gentiles, (2) whose power and wisdom are revealed through Christ crucified, and (3) who does not relate to God with the very same ethnicity, laws, and practices that had been ordained for the people of Israel. Prior to his RDE, Paul would not have viewed this God as the God he was worshipping. He would have seen such theological convictions as blasphemy.

Once again, there is a deeper and more nuanced discussion to be had here. But, without going into too much detail, one thing is clear: according to the Pharisaic Jewish story, Paul is not worshipping the God he had once worshipped. He has abandoned the God of Israel and fallen away from the religiousness that once defined his life. Indeed, it is relevant to note that the most renowned book to argue that Paul was a convert—and do so convincingly—was written by a leading *Jewish* biblical scholar, Alan Segal.²¹ Nonetheless, from Paul's new perspective, and from the church's perspective, the God of Israel is the very same God who spoke to Paul through Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus.

3.4 Paul's new perspective

So, what precisely shapes Paul's new perspective—in contrast to his prior, Pharisaic Jewish perspective? For Paul, it is no longer ethnicity, law, practice, reproductive ties, or indeed religious tradition or experience that define him as a child of God. While the church would come to take on its own distinctive religious traditions, in a way that departed from some of its Jewish roots, these traditions were not foundational to its true identity. Rather, they were only secondary ways for its members to express their faith. Indeed, within the church, it was possible for Jews and Gentiles to retain some of their own distinctive practices in ways that would continue to distinguish them from one another. Nonetheless, when such practices took place under the lordship of Christ, they were very much subsidiary to the uniting power of the Holy Spirit: the power that united them as brothers and sisters, together as the one body of Christ, the one people of God.

²¹ Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Following his RDE, therefore, Paul does not focus his energy primarily on trying to convert people to a new movement that is initiated and gains momentum by stories of religious conversion. Rather, he seeks to witness to the movement grounded in and realized by the story of God for us in Jesus Christ—the story of what Christ has done and what Christ is doing through the life-giving power of his Spirit. Through Paul's witness to Christ, it is his hope that others might also become caught up in this story—that they might stop resisting God's story in favour of their own ones. By so doing, they will not necessarily be required to give up their particular cultural commitments. For Paul, Jesus is the Messiah who expands the people of God to become a multicultural and multi-ethnic community gathered together under the lordship of Christ to form a greater whole, the church—and this movement speaks to the emergence of a new, all-inclusive, higher form of faith.

As we have discussed, when Paul encountered Christ, Paul did not encounter someone who called him to leave his Jewishness behind. Rather, he encountered a resurrected Jew, who, he believed, had come to transform him *with* his Jewish commitments. While Paul was certainly called to repent, he did not think he had to repent of his Jewishness or, indeed, of some past idolatry (i.e. worshipping a false God). For Paul, his life was transformed because the God whom he had always worshipped, albeit with some confusion, had encountered him in Jesus Christ and was drawing him into a new way of life, with Christ at its centre.

So, if referring to Paul's transformative experience as an event of conversion, without qualification, risks distorting our understanding of Paul's faith, what might be a better way to refer to his transformative experience? One option is that it is better to describe Paul's RDE as a prophetic calling rather than a conversion. As Paula Fredriksen writes:

'conversion' in this context [of discussing Paul's RDE] necessarily entails anachronism, whereas 'call' enables us to take seriously Paul's own background, rather than the late first century one Luke provides him with. For Paul did indeed experience a radical change in his religious consciousness prior to his evangelizing activity, and he couches this claim in the language appropriate to it from within *his* religious tradition: in the face of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom, Paul was called to preach the good news of salvation to the Gentiles.²²

By using the language of calling, as Fredriksen also points out, drawing on Hans Dieter Betz, Paul's RDE could be compared to the call of prophets like Jeremiah, insofar as it led him to deepen and challenge his Jewish understanding of life before God. Practically speaking, one of the key strengths with the language of calling, for our purposes, is that it puts the emphasis on the external judgement of

²² Paula Fredriksen, 'Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self', *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns, 37, no. 1 (1986): pp. 3–34; quotation from p. 16.

God. It places the self-communication of God's Word at the centre of the drama rather than the secondary existential transformation that took place as a consequence of Paul's vision of Christ. Again, having encountered Christ, Paul is not remotely interested in making *his* transformation, *his* religiousness, the centre of his story. Nor is he interested in presenting his RDE as a paradigm of Christian experience. All this is entirely *secondary* to the one who calls him to be a witness to God's Christological story. Accordingly, Paul writes:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Cor. 4:5-7)

What we see here is that Paul's ministry does not prioritize religious experience and individual conversion. He is not primarily wrapped up in his own ability to convince others to accept God or Jesus as the absolute telos of their lives. Rather, he is committed, first and foremost, to being a witness to Jesus Christ, in whom the history of Israel finds its fulfilment. It is Jesus Christ who is the foundation of the life of the church, and, therefore, it is Christ's story in which we are invited to participate. This is a story of the conversion of creation. It is a story of 'new creation' according to which God delivers creation from its old ways and makes everything new (2 Cor. 5:17). As one who has been given the eyes to see this transformation, Paul finds himself called to witness to it so others might recognize what was and is happening, and might also find their lives being swept up in creation's conversion to God. The experience of Christian conversion, therefore, is not primarily, for Paul, about an individual turning their life towards God, but about the one who has turned us and is turning us towards God, in and through his own life. It is this reality, Jesus Christ, who is the foundation of the Christian life and the primary focus of the New Testament.

To help us appreciate Paul's approach, let us briefly relate our theological framing of Paul's story to two other examples in which it clearly makes more sense to prioritize an external influence on a person over a person's own internal self-development. First, suppose a medical professional, Dr Jones, stumbles across some research that is taking place in some isolated part of the world. With her extensive background in cancer research, she suddenly realizes these researchers have made discoveries that will enable us to cure cancer. Under these circumstances, it would seem strange if Dr Jones went away and started writing articles that focused on how her beliefs had changed about the possibility of a cure for cancer, which primarily drew attention to how she had become a more hopeful person, had developed a greater faith in science, and so on. Rather,

we would expect Dr Jones to draw attention to the discovery of a cure for cancer, to the new recognition that defines her vocation. Second, let us relate our theological framing of Paul's story to an example that is more applicable to our focus on accountability. If a parent discovered a tutor who was able to transform their child's learning (in a way no other tutor had been able to do), it would seem inappropriate for the parent to draw all the attention to the ways in which their child had suddenly become a better learner, without giving sufficient attention to the tutor who had transformed their child's learning. To focus primarily on the child's growth would detract from the tutor in a way that misrepresented or, at least, under-represented what was going on.

In both of these examples, it should seem quite obvious that the story of a person's development revolves around an external reality influencing them. What the first example highlights is that it would be inappropriate for Dr Jones to focus on her existential change because the story of what she has discovered is far more significant. That is, all things considered, it would seem much more fitting to view Dr Jones as a character in the story about the cure for cancer rather than viewing the cure for cancer primarily as a development in the biography of Dr Jones. What the second example highlights is that, when an accountant plays a fundamental role in an accountee's existential development, it will often be more important to draw attention to the significance of the accountant rather than the accountee. One of the primary reasons it is important in these two cases to draw attention to the external factor, rather than the internal development, is that learning about the external factor has the potential to play a decisive role in elevating others in a way that learning about a person's internal development would not. Similarly, throughout Paul's writings, we find a focus not on his own life but on God and what God is doing through him so that his life might be of service to others, so that they might receive revelation, wisdom, understanding, strength, faith, hope, love, endurance, patience, and so on.²³

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on his story as an apostle, Paul describes himself as 'the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God' (1 Cor. 15:9). But he then adds: 'by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me' (1 Cor. 15:10).²⁴

²³ See Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–20; Phil. 1:3–11; Col. 1:9–11; 1 Thess. 1:3–4; 2 Thess. 1:11–12.

²⁴ Accordingly, Leander Keck notes, 'whoever wants to understand the anthropological import of Paul's construal of accountability must follow him in his dialectical thinking about human and divine action. According to Paul, the self is simultaneously an accountable doer and the place where Christ (or God, or the Spirit) is the real doer.' Leander Keck, *Christ's First Theologian: The Shape of Paul's Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), p. 138.

As we considered in this chapter, for Paul, the story of his accountability to God is ultimately a question about who he is according to God's story. Following his RDE, Paul grew resistant to who he was as a self-defining 'I'—to his old self who was enslaved to defining himself as a character in his story of the world. Instead, he sought to embrace who he was as an 'I' defined by the grace of God—a character in God's Christological story of the world. Who Paul truly was and should have been was something he had to learn about from God by indexing his life to God's self-revelation in Christ and by experiencing the judgement of the Spirit.

If, therefore, we are to frame accountability to God in a way that reflects Paul's theology, we must 'regard no one from a human point of view' (2 Cor. 5:16). Rather, we must learn about who we are 'from God' according to our reconciliation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18). When we do so, we can come to know that the growth and flourishing of human accountees, before God, must be construed relationally, as a sign (1) of God's authority and judgement, and (2) of God graciously enabling us to respond to this authority and judgement in and through Christ, by the power of the Spirit, as 'ambassadors for Christ' (2 Cor. 5:20). In short, the story of our accountability to God must have as its focus the triune God, the ultimate accountor, and what God graciously does to hold us to the account of who we are in Jesus Christ, so that we might participate in and experience our destiny as the children of God (Eph. 1:4–5).

10

Conclusion

This book started by adopting a more general view of accountability before moving to a more specifically theological one. As such, we shifted from a narrow focus on the shared projects that characterize human life in this world to a wider focus on the ultimate shared project for which God creates this world. By way of conclusion, I shall offer an overview of these two foci and try to encapsulate the relationship between them.

When reflecting on the more general use of the word ‘accountability’, we considered, in Part I, how relationships of accountability can support human flourishing by helping persons to fulfil particular roles in shared projects. Teachers can help students to become (more) learned, doctors can help patients to become (more) healthy, and parents can help children to become (more) moral. We also, however, considered ways in which students, patients, and children can help teachers, doctors, and parents to succeed in their respective roles. Within such relationships, there is an implicit assumption that human flourishing rests on our ability to fulfil a particular role under the legitimate authority of others. We flourish when we are able to meet the valid expectations of others according to some shared project—for example, teaching, healthcare, and moral formation. So, if a student excels intellectually in the way a teacher expects, this can lead to a good report card and, perhaps, proud parents. If a patient receives test results that align with a doctor’s vision of good health, then the doctor can share the good news with them. And if a child has behaved well by being obedient, their parent may reward them to affirm the value of such behaviour. Also of note here is that, within these relationships, there can be an added social dimension such that an accountee flourishes not only by fulfilling their particular role in a shared project, but also by sharing in an accountant’s delight in their success.

There is much to be said for this picture of accountability. Without question, *telé* such as knowledge, health, morality, and social acceptance can inform how we evaluate human flourishing in this world. Yet, at the same time, before God, it is vital that we not absolutize such *telé*—that we do not exaggerate their role in defining and orienting our lives in a way that distracts from an undivided devotion to God. If this happens, we fall into an idolatry of the relative, wherein we allow such relative *telé* as knowledge, health, morality, and social acceptance to define our narratives in some ultimate way—in a way that diverts us from God’s creative purposes. By becoming absorbed in relative narratives, while neglecting the overarching theological narrative, we become caught up in a superficial narrative

of the world, myopically defining ourselves by relative successes and finite goals. Consequently, any god(s) in whom we might believe becomes a character in one of our narratives—for example, a character whose role it is to ground true knowledge, to facilitate eternal life, to establish moral perfection, and/or to create social order.

To challenge the inclination to capture God in one of our narratives, Part II of this book turned to focus on what it means to be accountable to God according to God's narrative—specifically, the theological narrative of creation that has its beginning and end in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 21:6), the one in, through, and for whom all things were created (Col. 1:16–17). According to this narrative, human flourishing and fulfilment are not ultimately grounded in our abilities to become something we are not (yet), guided by the judgement of another. Rather, human flourishing is experienced through the Holy Spirit's elevating us to identify with Jesus Christ, in whom we discover our destiny as the children of God. By sharing in the triune life, in Christ by the Holy Spirit, we discover our ultimate value does not lie in what we might individually become, but in the fact that, in Christ, we are beloved by the God who bestows value and meaning upon us.

Towards the end of the book, I elaborated further on what it means to affirm that human accountability to God is not simply brought about *by means of* Christ but is realized *in Christ*. While I did not aspire to explain precisely what this means, we did consider some of the implications of this affirmation. By drawing on the theology of the apostle Paul, I contended that Christ lives for us as the one mediator in whom we are drawn to share in the triune life of God and thereby become oriented towards our ultimate end in God. That this takes place not just *through* but *in* Christ is critical. When the Holy Spirit enables us to *identify with* (rather than simply *use*) the incarnate Son in a relationship of union, the Spirit places us in that relationship wherein we belong to God as God's children. For Paul, we never relate perfectly to God in and of ourselves. At best, we participate in the humanity of the Son's perfect fellowship with the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we are elevated into union with Christ, there is a sense in which we lose ourselves to God.¹ The self-constructing, self-sustaining, self-affirming, self-possessing 'I' that once existed at the centre of our human stories is metamorphosed by God such that we no longer live unto ourselves but unto God; our sense of autarchy is displaced by an experience of belonging to God; and we come to know ourselves as we are known by God. Yet it is also the case that, *ultimately*, very little changes. This is because the fallen human stories we create for ourselves are, within the context of God's story, delusionary—albeit delusions that lead to a

¹ Insofar as we do not merge into God, thereby losing our identities altogether, we do not lose ourselves completely to God.

destruction and suffering that is very much part of this fallen world. As was argued, our stories have no power beyond themselves to make a difference to God's ultimate story for creation, and therefore to God's knowledge of who we are as characters in that story. God never knows us according to the fallen stories we tell about ourselves. Before God, each of us is always a 'you' before we are an 'I'—always limited to being a character in God's story before we are characters in our own stories. No matter how much we might attempt to think otherwise, we are not our own (1 Cor. 6:19).

Yet, importantly, to be a 'you' in God's story of creation is to be more than just an idea in the mind of God. When God creates the world, God creates something entirely new, which is characterized by a particularity and history that extends beyond the divine imagination. Nonetheless, God does not create us to find our own way, isolated from God, and captivated in our own realms of meaning. Rather, we are to find fulfilment and flourishing in loving union with the divine source who knows us, judges us, and holds us to the truest account of ourselves: the account we were destined to embody before the foundation of the world, which is found in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, according to the eternal will of the Father.

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